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“I’m bac—”

I had just come back from school, opened the living room door, and was stunned into silence by the sight in front of me.

Silky, long black hair. A frilly white blouse. A high-waisted, knee-length, navy blue skirt with thin black stockings. This very combination was popular on the internet not so long ago as one of many outfits that could kill virgins. The beautiful girl in front of me was making it live up to its “virgin killer” name. Over the top, she wore an equally frilly apron as she cooked.

“Oh! Welcome back, Onii-chan! Dinner’s ready!”

I couldn’t find the words to reply.

“Or do you want to take your bath first? The tub is already full.”

“No, wait a second...”

“Well, since it’s ready, might as well eat dinner first, right?”

Ignoring my complaints, the beautiful girl laid food across the coffee table. Everything looked delicious, and the mouthwatering scent of hamburger steak, white rice, and miso soup drifted up my nostrils.

“Let’s eat!” she chimed. We sat together on the couch, chopsticks in hand.

“Hm? Whatcha starin’ at? Ah, I get it! You want me to feed you, don’t you?” she asked.

“Excuse me?!”

“What am I going to do with you? Come now, open wide!”

She took a piece of hamburger and shoved it into my face, so I had no choice but to open my mouth.

“Mmph!”

The meat was much hotter than I expected. I let out a painful moan.

“How is it? Is it tasty? You must be tired after that long day at school! But don’t worry, your little sister is here to listen to all your troubles.”

Tears streamed down my face from having my mouth literally scorched, but she didn’t seem to care, and had moved on to stroking my hair.

“Good boy! You’ve been such a good boy.”

I’d feared for my life when I had that burning hot piece of meat stuffed into my mouth, but I must admit that having my head caressed didn’t feel half bad. She was way too heavy-handed about it, but I could tolerate it. Maybe.

“I-I’ll eat the rest by myself,” I said, hoping to keep the wounds to a minimum, and started eating the hamburger with my own chopsticks.

“Hm... it’s good.”

“It’s not like I made it especially for you! I just wanted to eat hamburger steak and I ended up making too much.”

“What?”

Her change in tone caught me off guard. She was the one who’d asked me how the hamburger tasted, and now that I’d replied she was mad at me.

“And anyway,” she said, “you came home late today and you didn’t text me or anything. Why? I was waiting for you and even made you dinner. Is it another girl? Were you out with another girl?”

“Huh?”

Her expression darkened and she forcefully grabbed my arm.

“Show me your phone. I need to check whether you’ve been texting other girls.”

“Hey, wait!”

“Nishina, you’re getting it all wrooong!” I shouted at her. “The outfit is cute, and preparing dinner is fine too. But what’s with the younger sister roleplay? Then you switched to a caring older sister type! Then tsundere! And then *yandere*! Make up your mind! There’s so much going on that I’m getting lost!”

“But I just did the stuff I saw in the anime you recommended! All the things that otaku guys are supposed to love! And I performed them all perfectly!”

“*Those* are 2D girls, and *you* are 3D. You can’t simply copy everything they do! That’s just weird. You just need to get inspiration from them without forcing it! That’s why I recommended it!”

“Huh?! I read through every doujinshi you gave me, like, ten times, you know?! I even rehearsed my lines. And how expensive do you think this wig was? These clothes are so stuffy I’m almost dying in here!”

Kokoro stood up, furious, and threw her wig to the floor.

Sheesh.

“It’s your fault for not teaching me right. Tell me what I’m supposed to do to become an ideal girl!”

“Uh...?”

“You promised me you’d make me into the perfect otaku girlfriend!”

Why was I, Kagetora Ichigaya, living together with Kokoro Nishina, a popular gyaru (and otaku) girl from my school? Well, it’s a long story...

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“I hope I have the right place...” I whispered to myself.

There was a long line of people in front of that Akihabara karaoke shop, full of both girls and boys who looked older than me. Many of them were talking to each other, and I realized that most people had probably brought friends along. Having come alone, I considered coming up with an excuse to go back home, but I remembered that same-day cancellations weren't allowed.

So I, Kagetora Ichigaya, got in line too.

The event I was going to attend was called the “Otaku Meetup & Matchmaking Party.” My reason for going there was obvious: I wanted an otaku girlfriend.

I became an otaku back in grade school and, since then, have only had eyes for fictional girls. However, in middle school, I started watching a lot of rom-com anime and, also because of that, started wishing I had a real girlfriend. Of course, I couldn't just date anyone. She'd have to be an otaku too.

If I were a more casual otaku, just watching anime every now and then, any old girlfriend wouldn't be an issue. But someone like me, who spent considerable amounts of time and money on gacha games and anime swag, needed a girlfriend who could match his power level.

Then we'd be able to watch anime together, have fun singing karaoke, and maybe she'd even cosplay my favorite characters for me. That's why I needed an otaku girlfriend.

Unfortunately, there was no one who fit the bill at my school. The girls in the manga club weren't really my type, and they probably didn't like the same stuff as me anyway.

I was into works full of cute girls, but they were more into anime with sparkly dudes, Boys' Love (*yuck*), and girly gacha games. I didn't eavesdrop on them, but they always talked so loudly that I was forced to listen.

Since the situation at school was like *that*, I'd looked online for another way to find my ideal girlfriend. That's how I found out about the "Otaku Meetup & Matchmaking Party."

Hosted by a matchmaking company, it was an event where otaku could look for friends and dates with similar interests. Minors couldn't usually join this kind of thing, but no alcohol was being served, so there was no age restriction in place.

The party would be in a large karaoke room with a standing buffet, where all the attendees could get unlimited drinks. Reading about it, I'd been excited to turn up.

If possible, I'd wanted someone I knew to come with me, but my only otaku friend from school said he wasn't interested, so I had to suck it up and go by myself.

This is a huge chance for me. It's no time to be scared! I promised myself that I'd find the ideal otaku girl and get her number! I clenched my fists and mustered up all of my courage.

When it was my turn to enter the room, the staff greeted me.

"Hello! Let me check your reservation. One man, no women. Correct?"

I paid the three thousand yen admission fee and received a name tag. The name I wrote on it was what I'd be called for the duration of that day. *What should I choose?*

After thinking for a while, I wrote the handle I used online, *ShadowTiger*, and pinned the tag on my chest.

I was too caught up in my nervousness to take in the people around me, but now I noticed just how many there were. There were barely any couples, though the party had only just started.

I wonder if there's a girl my type; long black hair... pure, feminine looks...

I opened my eyes wide and scanned the room. *All of the girls are kind of meh.*

"The bar is now open for orders!" called one of the staff members, directing us to the counter.

During the short time I'd spent checking out the girls, several boy-girl pairs had already formed.

I have to hurry up and find a cute girl!

Unfortunately, all the decent girls were already busy chatting with other guys. *Ugh! Too late!*

I looked even harder, trying to find someone who was still free. In a corner of the room, I saw two average-looking girls silently staring at their phones. They weren't exactly my type, but I realized that if I kept nitpicking, there'd be no one left for me to talk with. That was the one outcome I had to avoid at all costs, so I started walking toward them.

However, just a few steps away, I stopped dead. My legs wouldn't move any further.

What am I even supposed to say to them? "Hi, where are you from?" No way! That'd be just like trying to pick them up!

As I imagined a conversation with them, a realization dawned on me. *I'm no good at talking to girls, am I?*

I couldn't even approach girls at school. Being alone in an unfamiliar place made it even more difficult. Impossible, actually.

Why did I think I could do this? What the hell was I thinking when I signed up for this party?

I probably thought that I just needed to show up and things would magically turn out fine. Maybe someone would even talk to me first, or I'd be able to find a reason to go up to them.

As if. I always convince myself that I can do things that are clearly impossible. It's a bad habit of mine. I should stop fooling myself.

Sighing, I made up my mind. *Enough. Time to leave.*

I'd signed up for the party, came all the way here, lined up, and actually entered the joint. That was a feat in itself for an asocial otaku like me. *Well done, Kagetora.*

If I didn't reassure myself like that, I'd probably start crying. In order to pay

the entrance fee, I'd had to sacrifice a considerable amount of my gacha funds and lunch money. Not to mention, I'd wasted a whole day off school.

But I'd rather blow three thousand yen than have to spend one more minute in this place.

I started walking—almost running, actually—toward the exit, when...

"Ouch!"

"Ah! I'm sorry!"

I bumped into a girl.

I continued to apologize while I turned to look at her, then froze in place, shocked.

"What...?!"

I'd seen her before.

No wonder I'd seen her, since we went to the same school. I'd never spoken with her, but she was in the same year as me, and her class was right next to mine.

What is she doing here?!

Kokoro Nishina. She was so popular that I knew her name even though we were in different classes. She'd stood out from the very first day of school.

Kokoro had a lot of friends and looked like she'd seen her fair share of guys' bedrooms. Most of the popular boys were into her. However, except for her clothing and hairstyle, she was actually a diligent student with decent grades. Or at least, so I'd heard.

I took a good look at her. Dyed hair. A short, red dress that revealed her shoulders. High heels. Large earrings. Makeup that even I, who didn't know the first thing about makeup, could tell was flashy. You would never expect a girl that looked like this to show up to a party aimed at otaku. So why was Kokoro Nishina, renowned popular girl and normie extraordinaire, attending a party like this?

I looked at her face again and noticed she'd turned terribly pale.

“You seem familiar. Could you be... from school?” she asked me, fumbling for words.

“Oh, Two-Heart-san! We found you!” a couple of men called out to her. “You ran away like that, so we’d been looking for you!”

The approaching duo were as stereotypically otaku as you could get. Their faces, their clothes, their rambling speech: they had it all (not that I’m one to talk).

They kept creeping closer and closer to Kokoro, who looked clearly distressed.

“Ah, s-sorry, I ran into an acquaintance, you see...” she said, grabbing my arm.

“Huh?!”

“Acquaintance?” one of the two men asked.

“He’s a f-friend of mine... I need to talk with him. See you later!” she said, successfully escaping the men while dragging me with her. I had no idea what was going on.

My only experience with being touched by girls was when they accidentally bumped into me on crowded trains. To be honest, having my arm grabbed like that was enough to make my heart race. The sweet smell that permeated the air around her (*Shampoo? Perfume?*) was making me dizzy.

Kokoro left the two men hanging there, dragging me out of the karaoke room and into the light of the stairway landing.

Once we were out of sight of everyone else, she stared up at me.

“I don’t know your name, but we go to the same school, right?” she asked, still pale for some reason. “Why are you here?”

“I’m just here for the party. Why are *you* here? You aren’t even an otaku,” I replied, annoyed at how she’d made it sound like *I* wasn’t allowed to be there.

Now that I could take a better look at her, I understood why she was so popular. Even in the first year of school, she was well-known for her good looks and, sure enough, she was cute enough to be on TV.

Her face and body were close to perfection. Of course, so were her outfit and hairstyle. I wasn't exactly a fashion expert, but even I could tell that she was on another level from most other girls at the party.

However, I wasn't into gyaru or slutty-looking girls. I didn't want anything to do with them.

I never hid the fact that I was an otaku, which the gyaru in middle school made fun of me and bullied me for. I was so traumatized that I'd started avoiding social interaction altogether, sitting by myself in a corner of the classroom trying not to be noticed by anyone.

That was why gyaru, no matter how cute they were, brought me nothing but fear.

Kokoro Nishina, especially, was the exact opposite of my "long black hair" and "pure, feminine looks" dream girl.

"For the party? Like, you want to meet otaku girls?" she asked me, confused.

"Y-Yeah."

"I see. So, you're an otaku too," she said, and her expression relaxed a little bit.

Wait, what did she just say? You're an otaku... too?

"I guess you do look like one," she added after looking me up and down.

"What?!"

What's that supposed to mean?!

Her comment was rude and unwarranted. I'd done my best to clean up for this party.

"More to the point, what are *you* doing here?!"

"That's..." she dropped her gaze with a troubled expression.

After a moment, sighing deeply, Kokoro looked back at me as if she'd found the courage to say something very important.

"Isn't the reason obvious? I want a boyfriend who's an otaku like me!"



“What?!”

An otaku like me? Her? This gyaru? An otaku?! And she’s here to find an otaku boyfriend?!

I knew that there were otaku so good at hiding their power level that you’d think they were normies, but this was hard to believe. After all, she was the most popular girl at school.

“Anyway, I won’t tell anyone that you were here, so please keep it a secret! I beg you, don’t tell this to anyone!” she pleaded.

“Uh? Ah...” I was so taken aback by how desperate she sounded that I couldn’t even answer her properly.

“I don’t want people at school to know I’m an otaku! And if my classmates found out that I came to a party like this, it’d be the most embarrassing thing in the world!”

“Sure, fine. But would it really be that bad if people knew?”

Sometimes, popular girls in my class—even if they weren’t full-fledged otaku—talked about anime and gacha games. I assumed that someone like Kokoro, who was so high up the school’s popularity ladder, wouldn’t really be made fun of even if she were an otaku.

“It’d be worse than bad! It’d be terrible!”

“But some of the girls in my class also talk about anime and stuff...”

“They’re not otaku! They just watch anime, and that’s it! Those casuals know nothing about doujinshi, or Comiket, or cosplay! Even then, the other girls say things like, ‘*Wow she’s such a total geek!*’ Just imagine what would happen to a real hardcore otaku like me! I’d lose all my friends and be shunned like a creep!” She explained her point without drawing a single breath.

If what she said was true, not only was Kokoro an otaku, she was a pretty serious one at that.

“Okay, I get it. I won’t tell anyone, all right?” I finally answered, still shocked by her intensity.

“Really? Not a soul?” she asked, blinking up at me. She looked terrified.

“Yeah.”

“A-Aren’t you going to, like, blackmail me? Like, you won’t tell anyone as long as I do something in return?”

“Excuse me?”

“You know, like...” she said, blushing, “if I want you to keep the secret, I have to obey all your orders, or become your sex slave, or...”

“What are you talking about?! You read too many weird manga!” I yelled, unable to contain my surprise.

That kind of thing only happens in X-rated doujinshi!

“I’m not going to blackmail you or anything. I won’t tell anyone that you’re an otaku!”

“R-Really?!” she said, surprised.

“Yes.”

“Oh... Thanks.”

The fear slowly drained from her face.

I’d read some light novels where the heroine would blackmail guys with their dirty secrets, but I wasn’t that cruel.

“Still...” Kokoro leaned against the wall, sighing heavily. “That threw me for a loop. I didn’t think I’d run into someone from school here.”

That makes two of us, then.

“By the way, what’s your name?”

“K-Kagetora Ichigaya.”

“Oh, I don’t think I’ve heard of you.”

“Sorry I’m so unpopular!”

“Hey, I never said that... Hm? ShadowTiger...?” she mumbled, reading the name tag on my chest.

“Wait, wait!” she said, starting to laugh. “Is that because your name is Kagetora? Like, did you literally translate your name into English?! That’s so cringey! That’s the cringiest edgelord name ever! Hahaha!”

“Shut up! I thought it’d be easy to remember. I just wrote the first thing that came to mind!” I said, as my face began to glow with embarrassment.

I always use this for games. Is it really that cringey? Damn it, I’d better come up with a new name then...

“Anyway, you’re one to talk!” I said, reading “2≡” from her own name tag. “Two-Heart! The *Ni* from Nishina, meaning *two*. Then *Kokoro*, meaning *heart*! You’re doing the exact same thing!” I said, raising my voice.

“Not at all. It’s witty and cool!” she replied.

If it’s “witty and cool” to “literally translate your name into English.”

“Anyway, how’s it been so far?” Kokoro asked.

“How? What?”

“The party! Did you meet any decent girls?”

“Hmm...”

The shock of running into Kokoro had made me forget about everything. But now, I recalled the situation I was in, having come to this party looking for a potential girlfriend, only to be ready to turn tail and go home.

“Well, to be honest, it’s not been great. There aren’t any cute girls.”

I didn’t want to admit that I was going home because I didn’t have the courage to speak to anyone.

“Huh? All these girls, and none that you’d consider cute? Do you have the highest standards ever? How many girls have you talked to, anyway?”

I looked away, not wanting to answer her.

“Hey! Did you hear me?”

“It’s just that...”

“I couldn’t hear the last part! What did you say?”

“It’s just that... I still haven’t talked to anyone...”

“What? None at all?! After all this time?!” she gasped, appalled.

“But what am I supposed to do about it? It’s easier for girls, since you just have to wait for someone to come and chat you up! But for boys it’s different. We actually have to go and start the conversation!”

“Why are you getting mad at me now?! And don’t think girls have it that easy! Boys can talk to any girl they like. That’s nice! But we can’t even talk with the guys we like because we get approached by others first.”

“At least you can talk with someone! Do you understand the struggle of being alone while everybody else is chatting and having fun?!”

We were still arguing over which of us had it worse when we heard a voice from inside the room.

“The otaku meetup is almost over! Thank you for joining us!”

“What?!” We exclaimed in unison, shocked.

Over?! Kokoro and I rushed back into the karaoke room, but the staff was already showing everyone to the door.

“Please leave in an orderly fashion!”

Before we knew it, we were caught up in the crowd and ended up back outside where we’d started.

One of the groups we’d left with was discussing where they’d go next.

“Wanna go to karaoke together, just us?”

“Sure! Let’s go!”

Kokoro and I watched them from afar.

The party was over, and she was the only girl I’d spoken to. *Since I was planning to leave early anyway, I guess it’s all the same...*

“The party’s finished? Just like that?” Kokoro said to herself, dismayed.

“I prepared so much for this! It was the only chance I had! I got my nails done,

bought a new dress, and even practiced in front of the mirror! And I only managed to speak to two guys that I didn't even like, and you! And it's finished already? No! It can't be!"

Judging by how devastated she was, Kokoro had probably been looking forward to this party a lot, even more than me.

"Can't someone like you just get a friend to introduce you to someone? You don't seem like the type who'd have trouble dating," I said. Unlike me, Kokoro was popular. Did she really need to come to a party like this?

"I already told you that I'm hiding the fact that I'm an otaku! And I want my boyfriend to be an otaku too! That's why I could never search at school or through my friends!"

Hm? But doesn't that mean...?

"So I decided to be brave and came all the way here, but now it's over."

"So you mean," I asked her, "that you've never had a boyfriend?"

"How are you still not getting it?! I want an otaku boyfriend, but I can't tell any of my friends. Isn't it obvious that I haven't?!"

So she's just like me? She's never dated anyone?! I can't believe it! That slutty-looking Nishina has never dated a boy!

She still wasn't my type at all, but at least I felt like we had something in common. We both wanted to find someone with the same otaku hobbies as us, but couldn't find a date at school.

An asocial boy and a popular girl, facing the same problem. What a joke.

Sad and disappointed, we started walking toward the station.

"Say, Ichigaya... Do you have any otaku friends?" she asked me, her eyes shining with newfound optimism.

Does she hope that I can introduce her to a potential boyfriend? She's even more desperate than I thought.

"I have a friend at school, a few online, and then some from back in middle school."

“Oh!” She was already excited. *Shallow gyaru.*

If all that she was looking for in a boyfriend was his otaku taste then I’d have no problem introducing her to someone. But...

“Let me ask you something though. Exactly what kind of guy are you thinking about?”

“Well... He has black hair and doesn’t catch the eye but he’s actually good-looking. He takes care of himself, he’s kind of aloof but really kind to his girlfriend. He’s great at games and is certainly not a casual. He has to be, like, a real otaku. He doesn’t mind if his girlfriend is into really deep stuff or BL, and, possibly, he even likes that stuff himself. He’s loyal, he’s thin and tall, he’s up to cosplaying with me...”

“Otaku like that don’t exist!” I interrupted her.

Her expectations are way too high!

“No way! I’m sure there are lots of them! I’m not asking for a model or anything. And I’d be fine with someone who’s not *quite* handsome, in that male voice actor sort of way.”

“Are you dissing male voice actors?”

“Fine then, you tell me. What kind of girlfriend are you looking for? Earlier you said that there were no cute girls, as if *you’re* fashion magazine material or something.”

We’d argued all the way to the Showa-Dori entrance of Akihabara station, so we moved away from the crowd, continuing our discussion next to one of the columns.

“What kind of girl? Let’s see...” My imagination ran wild as I conjured up the image of my dream girl.

“She has to be a beautiful, innocent kind of girl who likes the same stuff as I do. You know, like anime, gacha games, and other things with cute girls in them. Not BL or otome games. Also, she should be kind and caring, have long black hair, pale, fair skin and be shorter than average. Preferably my age or younger. She should never have dated, shouldn’t have any male friends and...”

“Are you dumb?”

“Huh?!” I didn’t understand what she was trying to say. *Dumb? Me? Why?*

Kokoro was looking at me with disdain.

“Are you for real? Did you hit your head? You really think girls like that exist?” she asked.

“I don’t want to hear that coming from you!”

“First of all, how can you come out of a party like that saying that there were no cute girls? Lower those standards of yours, will you? Maybe try and look in a mirror for once?” she continued.

Is it me or am I being insulted?

“I-I don’t think I’m handsome or anything! Anyway, you were the one who asked about my ideal girlfriend! You have no right to say things like that!”

“It’s not even about being handsome! You aren’t taking care of yourself in the slightest, but you want her to be cute! That’s the crazy part!”

Kokoro’s words were like a critical hit straight through my chest.

“Not taking care of myself? I wore my best clothes for this party!” I said, my voice shaking.

“And that’s what you came up with? That weird rock band T-shirt, those cheap-looking jeans, a skull necklace, and sneakers that look like you bought them with your mom in grade school? You’re like the first result when you look up pictures of clothes for *nerds*!”

“Wh-What did you just say?!”

My knees grew weaker and weaker as she continued.

“Before you come to a place like this, shouldn’t you at least buy a fashion magazine or go to a trendy place like Shibuya or Harajuku and see what the other boys your age are wearing?”

I clenched my fists in anger.

Though I didn’t want to admit it, when it came to clothing, Kokoro definitely had the upper hand.

“But otaku girls probably want someone who looks like them, not some kind of stud!” I said.

“Sure, most are probably like that. That’s why there were so many girls at the party today. The average otaku probably wants a boyfriend who’s an otaku as well; one that accepts her taste and is interested in it, takes care of himself, and, if at all possible, is a little bit good-looking,” she said.

“I see?”

“Nobody wants someone like you, whose looks just scream *otaku*. And more importantly, you said that you’d rather she not be into BL or otome games, didn’t you? An otaku looking down on another’s taste is the absolute worst, just so you know. A boyfriend who isn’t into anime but doesn’t complain about my taste would be a thousand times better!”

I was already shocked, but this was the finishing blow. It’s not like I hated *all* fujoshi just because they liked BL and otome games. I just preferred girls who weren’t into that kind of stuff. *Am I really asking for too much?*

“Who are you to speak for all otaku girls anyway?!” I asked.

“I’m an otaku girl, that’s who!” Kokoro replied.

So she’s giving me advice as one otaku to another? But I can’t let her say all that stuff to me without hitting back at least once.

“Anyway,” I said, “you’ve been laying into me all this time, but you know, even if otaku girls don’t like me, otaku boys wouldn’t like you either!”

“Huh?!”

Out of nowhere, the pressure that had been building inside of me caused me to explode.

“A handsome, but not *too* handsome, guy with black hair who’s good at games, was it? Even if a guy like that existed, he certainly wouldn’t want to date someone like you!”

“What?! How would *you* know that?!”

“I’m also an otaku! I know all about the things an otaku boy looks for in a girl. And pretty much all otaku boys want a cute, innocent, simple, meek otaku

girlfriend to talk about otaku stuff with. That's the exact opposite of you!"

"The opposite?! Innocent, meek...?" Kokoro started mumbling to herself, completely astonished.

"A-And... you're sure of that?" she asked.

"It applies to almost all otaku guys, yes."

"Then... teach me. Teach me how to become the kind of girl that otaku look for!" she shouted.

"Huh?"

She stared at me, her eyes welling up with tears.

"If you do, I'll teach you how to become a boy that otaku girls actually like. I'll even help you find places to meet them!" she said.

"R-Really?!"

"But, in exchange, you have to help me as best as you can too! Like, telling me what kind of girl otaku guys want, introducing me to your otaku friends, or just helping me look for someone!"

Up until now, despite wanting an otaku girlfriend with all my heart, I had no idea how to go about it. Everything would be easier if Kokoro, who was an otaku herself, helped me out.

"Okay then! I'll help you find an otaku boyfriend. I can't really introduce you to my friends, since none of them are probably your type. But I can tell you how you should act if you want to be liked, and I can help you find the right places to look for them. So you better help me as well!"

I knew exactly what kind of girl otaku were looking for. You might say I was an expert. My knowledge would definitely be helpful to Kokoro.

It sucks I wasted so much time and money coming to this party and that I'll be going home with nothing to show for it, but maybe it wasn't totally worthless after all.

I hadn't found a girlfriend but, at least, I found someone who shared my objective. She was a gyaru, the type of person I hated the most, and she'd done

nothing but insult me, but it was much better than going at it alone.

“Perfect! If that’s decided, then come home with me!”

“Oka— What? Home?!”

* * *

“Whoa.”

The sight of Kokoro’s house amazed me. The whole neighborhood had nothing but big, fancy houses, and hers was no exception.

“I texted Mom and told her I’ll be bringing a friend back,” she said.

“Oh, okay.”

She’d surprised me by inviting me to her house out of the blue, but she’d explained that it was just to use her computer. She wanted to look for potential spots to find otaku dates, but her phone was almost out of data and there’d been no Wi-Fi nearby.

To be honest, the idea made me nervous. I hadn’t been to a girl’s house since kindergarten.

Will her parents mistake me for her boyfriend or something? How should I even act?

“Hm? The door’s locked...” Kokoro murmured, as she tried to open it.

She looked at her phone. “Oh! Mom got back to me. Right, she’s out with friends today.”

“What?”

“Oh well!” She shrugged it off, putting her phone back in her pocket, pulling out a set of keys, and opening the door.

W-Wait, but this means that... My heart was pounding in my chest, and my hands were shaking. More nervous than expected, I froze in place.

“What are you standing there for?” she asked, confused, waiting for me to follow her inside.

“I-It’s just... Y-You see...”

How can she be this cool about it?!

Of course, I didn't even like her like that and I didn't think that anything would happen just because we were by ourselves. But still! A boy and a girl, alone together...!

"You aren't getting any weird ideas, are you? Stop it! We're just going to look up some stuff online!" she said, countering my nervousness with a mix of hate and disgust.

"I-Ideas?! I was just worried about going inside your home without your parents' permission!" I replied, angered by her attitude.

She really knew how to be annoying. The fact that I'd get nervous because of someone like her made me even more annoyed.

I made up my mind to ignore the fact that she was a girl, and marched inside the house after her. We went through a hallway, a huge living room, and up the stairs, reaching Kokoro's room.

As soon as she opened the door, a sweet floral smell enveloped me. Just moments ago, I'd decided not to think these kinds of things, but this was too much for a virgin like me. *I think I'm going to pass out.*

Up until third grade, I was able to talk to girls just fine. Then I fell down the otaku rabbit hole. Ever since, I haven't had a single friend of the opposite sex. I even got nervous talking with old ladies in my neighborhood, let alone girls my age.

And now, somehow, I was walking into a girl's room, all alone with her. *I hope I'll be able to leave in one piece.*

"Oh..." Kokoro said all of a sudden, glancing at me. She sighed with a look of disappointment.

"What's *your* problem?" I asked her.

"No, it's nothing. I was just thinking that the first boy to come into my room isn't even my boyfriend. Not only that, but it's you of all people," she said.

"Me of all people?! You're the one who told me to come inside! Isn't that rude?!" I replied, outraged.

I'm the first boy she's ever invited to her room? I thought she'd had more experience of that kind, but you really can't judge a book by its cover.

I took a deep breath and looked around me.

The walls and furniture were all shades of pink and white, giving off extremely girly vibes. There were shelves lined with shojo manga, a corkboard covered in photographs of Kokoro with her friends, and the bed was full of heart-shaped cushions and plushies.

It was exactly what you'd expect from a girl's bedroom. However, I noticed something strange.

"It doesn't look like an otaku's room at all," I said.

"Oh, of course. I'm keeping it a secret from my family."

"Why would you do that?"

"My parents disapprove of otaku culture. They have their reasons," she said sadly, looking away from me.

Some parents were like that. But this meant that Kokoro had to hide her passions not only at school, but at home too. I didn't know just how deep into it she was, but for someone like me, that'd be hell.

"Oh, by the way, I'll show you something cool! It'll be the first time I show this to anyone, actually!" she said, suddenly beaming with excitement. I had to admit, the way she changed expressions so fast was pretty cute.

Something she hasn't shown to anyone? What could that be?

She opened a drawer, took out a key, and used it to unlock a closet.

Why would anyone keep their closet locked?

She opened it. I saw what was inside, and could no longer speak.

Stacks of manga. Manga magazines. Anime magazines. Game magazines. Anime Blu-Ray boxes. Voice actor concert DVDs. CDs. Character keychains. Rolled up posters and tapestries. Hoards of male character plushies. Figures of all shapes and sizes.

"Wh-What is this?!" I exclaimed, unable to believe my eyes at some of the

figures inside. They were mostly blushing, handsome male characters, but the one that had caught my eye was pretty much buck naked.

“Oh, this one? This is the preorder bonus for *Dramatic Mayday*, a super-popular BL game! He’s so detailed, isn’t he?! Ryokuha is kind of the uke to all the other boys. He’s sooo hot, right? His face is the cutest, and the way his abs cut into his crotch is to die for! The figure was so limited that I had to line up in front of the store for hours!”

Kokoro was rambling as I’ve never heard her before. Her voice, much faster than usual, was dripping with lust and pride.

Is she okay? Do girls really say things like that?!

She was much more of an otaku than I gave her credit for. Her slurred ramble was a perfect example of creepy otaku talk. The girl in front of me was like an entirely different person from the Kokoro at school.

“You buy BL games at a *store*?!” I said.

“Isn’t that normal?”

“And what is this?!” I’d noticed something even weirder than the lewd figure.

There was a bag hanging from the wall of the closet. It was covered in so many pin badges and keychains that I couldn’t even guess what color it was supposed to be. All those accessories pictured the same handsome blond guy from a boy idol game, or something. I didn’t know enough about girls’ games to recognize him.

“Is that... an *ita-bag*?!” I asked. Ita-bags: bags entirely covered in otaku merchandise. I’d seen them on Twitter before, but never in real life.

I could understand having several pieces of merchandise of the same character, but having dozens of copies of the same pin badge was just insane.

“Why do you have all these pins?”

“I unconditionally collect all Kaoru Hashimoto merchandise,” she said.

“Unconditionally collect...” I repeated, scared by the implication of those words. *Does she just hoard anything she finds with that character on it?*

In the span of a few seconds, I had to come to terms with the fact that Kokoro was probably even more of an otaku than I was.

“And then, I’ve also got—” she started saying, excitedly reaching to open a drawer.

“Enough! I got the point!” I interrupted her, desperately getting her to stop. It was for my own safety. “Now I understand why you keep your closet locked.”

“Yeah, if my parents found all this, I’d die on the spot!”

“But,” I said, recalling what she’d said about her parents, “you have to hide your power level both at school and at home. Isn’t that tiring?”

“Is it? I’m so used to it that I don’t even notice. Do your parents know about you being an otaku?” she asked, locking the closet and perching on a cushion. She gestured toward another for me to sit on, so I joined her.

“Yeah. I’ve never hidden it, even when we lived together.”

“You mean you don’t live with your parents anymore?” she asked.

“Uh-huh. I live by myself now.”

“Living by yourself while you’re still in high school? Is your life an anime or something?”

“My dad was transferred overseas for work, but I didn’t want to move away from Japan, so I convinced him to let me stay here.”

It had been half a year since both of my parents, together with my little sister, had moved abroad. They’d tried to make me go with them, but that would mean I’d have to move to India.

If I moved there, there’s no way I could watch Japanese television anymore. I’d have to *stream* anime, but apparently internet speeds in India aren’t that good. There’d be no guarantee that I’d find all the anime I wanted to watch online, and I didn’t like watching it illegally to begin with. And if my connection was that poor, I wouldn’t even be able to talk to my friends or play gacha games. Not to mention that, in India, I can’t get my hands on the latest manga.

Since becoming an otaku during grade school, I’ve surrounded myself with anime, manga, and games. I loved the Japanese otaku culture with all my heart,

and I couldn't imagine moving away from it. Without it, what would I have to live for?

I was so desperate to stay that I talked my parents into leaving me behind. *I'll do all the housework and study at the same time, but I don't want to live somewhere where I can't enjoy my hobbies. Let me stay in Japan by myself*, is what I'd told them.

At first, of course, they disagreed. They said that I was too young to live by myself, since I was still in high school. So I continued bothering them any chance I could get, and showing them that I could take care of myself. Eventually, they gave in.

Dad told me that, if I really felt so strongly about it, I'd be free to try living by myself. If everything went as planned with his job, they'd be back in Japan in around two years, after my high school graduation.

I had to promise that if my grades dropped drastically, or that if, when they came back on vacation, he saw that I'd let myself go too much, I'd have to follow them to India. That was how I started living alone while my parents sent me money to get by.

On top of my studies, keeping up with the housework was tough at first, but the idea of being able to retain my otaku lifestyle kept me motivated until I was used to it.

Even now, I didn't cook all my own meals, mostly eating premade stuff from supermarkets, convenience stores, and bento shops. The stuff I did end up cooking wasn't particularly fancy. Mom told me that, even if I didn't want to cook every day, I should eat nutritious meals and avoid unhealthy food. I was managing to do that much at least.

I usually took care of cleaning and doing the laundry on the weekends. It all worked out surprisingly well. After all, I hadn't joined an after-school club, which would rob me of my precious free time.

"You're tougher than I thought, huh. And you're super serious about being an otaku," Kokoro commented, impressed by my explanation. "But I guess I'd do the same. I don't want to live abroad! Like, I can't even imagine not having access to the internet. I want to watch anime as soon as they come out. And I

need to buy character merchandise and cosplay items...”

“I guess that’s true for all otaku,” I said.

“Yeah... Oh, we’ve been wasting too much time! We should get started!” she said, turning on her laptop.

“I need to find a place to search for otaku guys. What should I Google?
‘Where to find otaku boys’?”

Just as we were looking up our first spot to seek otaku romance, we heard the front door opening.

“I think Mom came back,” Kokoro said, opening her door to check downstairs.

“Ah!” she said, immediately closing it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Dad’s back too! Why now?! If he sees you here, I’m in trouble...” she said, her eyes wide with dread.

“I don’t care if Mom knows you’re here, but Dad... He’s always asking me whether I have a boyfriend or a crush or something, so he’d probably get the wrong idea.”

“Like, an ‘I’ll kill you for trying to touch my daughter’ kind of idea?!”

“No, not like that. He’s kind of a hopeless romantic, you see. He said that if I get a boyfriend, I have to introduce him...” Her words trailed off as we heard footsteps getting closer.

“Oh no! They’re coming up! Quick, hide!” she told me.

“Hide?! Where?”

She grabbed my arm and pulled me to my feet.

“Quick! Get inside!” she said, opening another closet. This one was packed with clothes, but there was just enough space for someone to hide, although uncomfortably.

There was a knock at the door, and my heart skipped a beat.

“Kokoro! Are you home?”

“W-Wait! I’m changing!”

I squeezed into the closet as Kokoro closed it from the outside. It felt weird being there, in the darkness, surrounded by the smell of her clothes.

“I’m done!” she called, after making sure the closet was shut.

I heard the door opening and more footsteps.

“D-Dad, what’s up? I thought you had work...”

“Oh, I had compensatory leave today. Anyway, do you have a moment? There’s something important we should discuss.”

“Hm? Didn’t you say you’d have a friend over today, Kokoro?”

“Ah, that’s, uh, she said she couldn’t come last minute! Anyway, what’s the important thing?”

Kokoro’s parents paused for a moment, their tone suddenly serious.

“Darling, tell her...”

“Yes. Kokoro, I know it’s sudden, but next month I’ll be transferred overseas.”

“What?”

Even I, eavesdropping from inside of a closet, was surprised.

“I’ll be working in England for a while... and I want you and your mother to come with me.”

“To England?!”

Transferred to England starting next month? They’re going to move overseas... That’s exactly what happened to me! What are the chances?

“It’ll only be for a year and a half, so we should be able to come back to Japan in time for you to graduate high school.”

“N-No...” Kokoro stammered, as if she were about to cry. “I-I don’t want to be away from you, but even more than that, I don’t want to be away from Japan!”

“Kokoro! What are you talking about?!”

“I want to stay in Japan by myself!”

“Are you serious? Whatever for?”

“Because... I have my friends and hobbies here...”

I understood how Kokoro felt. After all, I’d felt the same way just a few months ago, and seeing her closet stash told me just how much of an otaku she was. Enough to creep even *me* out.

“Hobbies? What kind of hobbies? Can’t you just do those in England?” Kokoro’s mother asked, but her daughter remained silent.

There’s no way she could come out of her otaku closet if her parents disliked the idea so much. That’d only give them more reason to take her away from Japan.

“M-My friend’s dad moved abroad earlier this year, and now they’re living alone, just fine. I can do it too! I can study and do chores, no problem!”

Is she talking about me?

“Studying and doing housework isn’t the problem. The problem is a girl as young as you living by herself. We can’t let you do something so dangerous.”

I remembered how shocked I’d been when my own parents told me that I’d have to move overseas. There were lots of reasons why I hadn’t wanted to go: not knowing the language, feeling that I probably couldn’t make any friends there, and so on. But the most important one was that I didn’t want to leave my beloved otaku culture behind.

Right now, I was probably the only person that understood how Kokoro really felt. However, her parents had a point. It was too dangerous for a high school girl to live by herself. I had to do something.

This probably won’t work. Or it’ll make things even worse. But I have to try!

There was only one way to save her.

“Ahhh!” I jumped out of the closet, much to the surprise of Kokoro’s parents, who were now screaming.

“What?! Who’s this?!”

“I-Ichigaya?!”

“Nice to meet you! I’m Kagetora Ichigaya! I go to the same school as your daughter!”

“Wh-Why were you inside the closet?!” Kokoro’s father eyed me warily. I must have looked incredibly suspicious. Reasonably so.

“I wasn’t doing anything weird! Nishina and I don’t have that kind of relationship! She just invited me over to hang out, that’s all,” I said.

“E-Exactly! I told you that I had a friend over, remember? But since he’s a boy, I thought Dad would tell me off, so I asked him to hide!” Kokoro, despite her surprise, played along with me.

“So, I’m very sorry, but I overheard your conversation just now. I know it doesn’t concern me, but...” Both her parents stared at me as I rambled.

“If you’re worried about Nishina—I mean, Kokoro!—living alone, she could just come and live with me!”

“What?!”

“And I even have a free room in my house! It’s a really safe place, in a good neighborhood where nothing dangerous ever happens.”

“Ichigaya...?” Kokoro looked at me, just as confused as her parents.

To be honest, I was confused myself, hardly believing the words that were tumbling out of my mouth. I just believed that, after that conversation, I was Kokoro’s only chance of staying in Japan.

My house had two floors and a single spare room. Although Kokoro’s parents would be away for a year and a half, mine wouldn’t be back for two years, so that wouldn’t be a problem. We’d just need to hide her when my family was here on vacation.

Nonetheless, I realized the flaw in my reasoning. It might be a good neighborhood, but, to her father, the most dangerous part was *me*, a boy.

Of course *I* didn’t want to do anything to their daughter! And even if I *did*, there were plenty of reasons why I probably couldn’t. Making them believe me was a long shot, but I had to try. Kokoro’s face was frozen with concern.

“What is your relationship with my—” Her dad started speaking, but Kokoro

interrupted him.

“Y-You’re always telling me to find someone I love and to bring him home as soon as I’ve found him, right? I never told you because I was too embarrassed, but Ichigaya is my boyfriend!”

“Huh?” Her parents were speechless, absolutely shocked. Just as I was.

What the hell did you just say?!

“And you also told me that if I fall in love, I should value that love over everything else, right?! So, that’s why I can’t leave Japan! I don’t want to move so far away from my boyfriend!”

“K-Kokoro...” The bewildered couple looked at their daughter, and then at me.

I kind of understood what she was trying to achieve. She wanted to make me pose as her boyfriend so they wouldn’t argue against her staying with me. *But isn’t that going to make it much worse?*

Having a boyfriend was one thing, but living with him? While both of us were still in high school? No normal parent would ever allow that.

“So, Kokoro, this is what you mean about not wanting to come with us...” her father said, gazing at his daughter and sighing.

“I met your mother when we were in high school. We were classmates. I was a troublesome, unruly student. She, on the other hand, was so diligent that she was chosen as class president. We couldn’t have been more different, but that’s why I fell in love with her.” All of a sudden, he was reminiscing about his school days.

“Because I was pretty much a delinquent, your mother’s parents were opposed to us being together. We even thought of running away from home, but instead we spent years trying to convince them. Eventually, the day came when they gave us their blessing for us to marry. So... I know how both of you must be feeling.” He glanced from me to Kokoro with a melancholic smile on his face.

What is this guy going on about?

“I want to know more about you, Ichigaya,” he told me, “but if my Kokoro chose you, I’m sure that you’re a wonderful young man.”

“I, uh... huh?”

“Kokoro, you don’t want to leave him, no matter what, right?” he then asked her.

“Th-That’s right!”

“I see. To be honest, it’s hard to imagine living away from my own daughter. Even if it’s only for a while, it breaks my heart so much I can’t take it! But dragging you away from the boy you love... I can’t make my Kokoro cry like that. I know how it feels to have the world fighting against your love.”

He can’t be serious! That’s all the convincing it took?! Nishina wasn’t joking when she said that her dad was a hopeless romantic! He really puts romance above everything else...

But she won’t go along with it, I thought, exchanging looks with her mother, she looks more grounded.

“Kokoro,” she said, “I was actually very worried about you. You’re in high school, and you’ve never brought home a boyfriend, or even just a male friend. All this time I’ve been hoping you’d find love like we did. And now, to think that you had such a wonderful relationship and didn’t even tell us about it!”

Her concerned expression transformed into a smile.

“I’m incredibly happy for you. But you’re still so young. I don’t want you to do anything unbecoming. If you can promise me that, you have my permission.”

I was struggling to understand how two adults could be so easily convinced by their high school daughter.

“Please, make our Kokoro happy,” her father said, offering me a kind smile.

“Uh?! Ah, I... Yes!” I replied, going along with everybody else in the room.

I was the one who’d started it, but I certainly hadn’t expected things to play out like this.

We moved to the living room to talk things through over dinner.

Kokoro's dad kept asking probing questions about his daughter and how we started dating, so I had to make things up on the fly as best as I could.

After a thorough interrogation, he somehow liked me even more, telling me that, "now that I've spoken with you, I'm positive that you're a fine young man."

"However," he continued, looking at us worryingly, "just as your mother said earlier, you're both still in high school. Even though you're already planning on getting married, you should be aware that there are some boundaries that shouldn't be crossed yet, do you understand?"

I know, sure, but...

"Huh?! Dad, don't say creepy things like that! I'd never do anything of the sort with him!" Kokoro exclaimed, disgusted.

Does she really have to phrase it like that?! I'm trying to help her out here!

"Oh? Really?" her father asked, surprised by her outburst. After all, that didn't sound like something a teenage girl would say about her boyfriend.

"I-I would never think of doing those things before marriage! That's, like, out of the question!" she said, blushing. You could tell that she wasn't lying. She didn't look like it at all, but maybe, deep down, she wasn't as laid back about these things as I thought she was.

"I think so too! You have nothing to worry about!" I agreed, and her dad's face seemed to relax.

After dinner, her parents asked if they could talk with mine. However, since they were abroad, I insisted that I should be the one to tell them about it.

And so, it was decided that Kokoro would be living at my house for the next year and a half, until her father was transferred back to Japan. We set up the date and everything. She'd move in with me just before her parents left.

My self-proclaimed new father drove me home, but I found myself continuing to panic.

Nishina... living with me?! We're not even dating! How am I going to survive?

I crashed onto my bed, my head spinning with all the possible implications of living with a girl. I was completely exhausted, but I couldn't forget my responsibilities, so I took out my phone to grab my daily login bonuses and do some in-game missions.

However, my exhaustion got the better of me, and I fell asleep with my phone in my hand.

3

The next day, at school.

I gathered up my things to head to my next class. To my surprise, Kokoro was standing outside the room, waiting for me.

“Do you have a minute?” she asked me.

I followed her until we were out of sight next to the gym storage room.

“First of all, I want to make sure of this, but... I really can live in your house, right?” she asked nervously.

Just as I’d told her parents, I really did have a spare room in my house. Since my family wasn’t going to be back for at least two years, there was no problem with Kokoro living in it.

Well, there was *one* problem. The fact that a virgin like me, who had never dated, kissed, held hands, or even had a friendly conversation with a girl, was going to share a roof with a beautiful one. She wasn’t my type and she was more interested in her closet hoard than she would ever be in making moves on me, but still... It was enough to freak me out.

“If you’re fine with it? I’m not your boyfriend, and you’d be living with a boy that you don’t even like.”

Isn’t she scared that I’ll do something to her?

“So I won’t even have to hide my hobbies anymore? That already sounds better than living with my parents!” she grinned happily, showing no hint of distrust.

“And it’ll be easier for you to help me find a boyfriend if we live together! Like, I’m not really comfortable talking to guys, but you don’t count. It’s probably because you’re an otaku like me. Or... maybe I just don’t see you as a boy?”

“Excuse me?!”

She doesn't see me as a boy?! Why is she always so rude?!

"But you're going to tell me that you don't want me to come to your house after all, aren't you?"

"No, don't worry."

I'd come up with the idea in the heat of the moment but, even now, I didn't regret it. As someone who'd been through similar circumstances, I could empathize with her. She was very annoying, but I still wanted to help her.

"I see. Thanks, it's really a huge help," she said, seriously thanking me for the first time. "I'll still keep my half of the promise. I'll help you find the best otaku girlfriend, you'll see! So let's try super hard, okay?"

"Yeah... let's do our best!"

Around a week after that, Kokoro and her parents brought her stuff to my house. It took a while to move everything in, because between clothes and cardboard boxes—that I hoped weren't full of lewd figures—she had a lot of baggage.

I used to use the empty room for storage, so I had to clean it out before they turned up. Thankfully, the door to that room had a lock, so when my family came back on vacation, Kokoro could just keep her stuff inside and go somewhere else. I'd just say that I kept my hentai in there and I didn't want anyone to see. That should be enough to take care of it. Probably.

It wasn't until now, when I was helping Kokoro carry her bags inside, that I thought about what it meant to hide a thing like this from my family.

* * *

A few more days passed and it was finally Saturday—the day that Kokoro was going to move in with me.

She saw her parents off at the airport before getting the train to my place.

"Oh, thank you."

I'd offered my guest some tea, still not entirely processing the fact that she was here to stay. Now that it was just the two of us, alone inside my living room, I started feeling nervous again.

“Whew! It feels great knowing I don’t have to worry about my parents wandering into my room!”

“Aren’t you sad about your parents being so far away?” I asked her (as if I was one to speak).

“I guess I am, just a little bit. Oh, you should know... Before leaving today, my dad said something *really* weird...”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘When we’re back in Japan, you’ll be close to graduating high school. So, after that, I’ll be looking forward to the wedding!’”

“W-Wedding?!” I yelped in surprise. “How are we going to lie our way through *that*?!”

“We’ll get out of it somehow.”

“I wish I had your optimism...”

“When they come back, I’ll just tell them that we broke up and that I actually want to marry someone else,” she said.

“Your dad would kill me!”

“If we say that you dumped me, maybe. But if we just say that I fell in love with someone else it’ll be fine. Maybe they’ll be mad at me but they’ll have to get over it.”

“Will they? If you’re so sure...”

“After all, Dad did the same thing. When he fell in love with Mom, he already had a girlfriend, so he dumped her. He thinks love is the most important thing, so he probably won’t make a fuss about it.”

I couldn’t even imagine talking about my parents like that, but her dad was a different breed.

“That’s why I have to find someone I love so much that we’ll get married in the next couple of years!”

“I see.”

I wanted to find an otaku girlfriend, but I didn’t want to be killed by her

father. But since Kokoro and I had already promised to help each other, there was no going back. I could only give it my best.

“Anyway,” she said, “I was thinking that maybe, before going out of our way to meet new people, we should make ourselves more datable. You told me that I’m nothing like an otaku’s ideal girlfriend, remember? So we should get a little bit closer to what they like before putting ourselves out there.”

At the otaku party, Kokoro had told me that in my current state, I’d never get the girlfriend I wanted. It was pretty harsh, but I’d avoided getting depressed over it because she’d distracted me by moving in.

She continued, “And even if we did meet someone, we probably wouldn’t have much to talk about, right? That’s why we’d better teach each other about what’s popular first!”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Now that I thought about it, I didn’t really know what otaku girls liked.

“But you also said that you don’t like girls who are into otome games and stuff, didn’t you? You said you’d rather date someone who likes the things that you like.”

If our tastes are totally different, dating will be no fun at all.

“I’m sure there are girls like that somewhere, but they’re probably pretty rare. Some girls enjoy all types of content, but a girl who’s only into booby female characters is kind of... iffy,” she said.

“How so?”

“I only know about them from Twitter and online forums, but most girls like that are either cosplayers who want to dress up as pretty characters or, you know... attention whores. Sketchy girls who only pretend to like them to gain followers.”

“No way! You’re making that up!” I said, offended.

“I haven’t met any girls like that. But I’ve read about boys falling in love with them and seriously regretting it. Kind of like you. You’re exactly the type who would fall for that.”

“Huh?!”

Otaku girls are only into female characters for attention?! They just want followers?! I don't want to believe it...

But then again, if she read about it happening to other people, she must have heard it from somewhere.

“In any case, if you want an otaku girlfriend, shouldn't you learn how to be more likeable to the kind of girl you want? That'll probably work better than chasing after a pretty face that turns out to be a complete psycho. Anyway, as long as she's cute and nice, does it even matter that much what kind of fandom she's into? To me it doesn't.”

“You do have a point.”

“Since you'd both be otaku, you could just tell her about the things you like, and maybe she'll start to like them too. That'd be nice, wouldn't it?”

Now that she explained it to me like that, I realized I didn't care if a potential girlfriend was a fujoshi or not, just as long as she had the ideal looks and personality.

“Don't worry, I'll teach you about stuff that otaku girls are crazy for! In exchange, teach me about what's popular with guys, okay? If I get that down, I'm sure I'll be able to find my perfect boyfriend!”

“Ok, deal. Leave it to me!”

It all made a surprising amount of sense. If learning more about girl-aimed content was all it took to find a girlfriend, I was ready to do it.

So, we decided that we'd start by teaching each other about what was popular with otaku of the opposite sex.

“But let me start. Today I'll teach you, if that's okay?” I said.

“Sure! But before that... aren't you hungry?” she asked.

It was already 7 p.m.

“I am, actually. I have some frozen rice, so we could go buy something to eat with it from the store.”

“We could just cook something. Can I look in your fridge?”

“Of course. By the way, you don’t need to ask me for permission. You’re going to live here after all.”

She opened the fridge and looked inside.

“Not much in there, right?” I asked.

“You have eggs and some veggies... So you cook sometimes. I’m kind of surprised.”

“Nothing fancy, but yeah.”

“It’s all we’d need for fried rice. Can I...?”

“Oh?! S-Sure...”

Ignoring my surprise, she picked up a knife, without even checking a recipe. She chopped the onions as if she’d done it a thousand times before.

Honestly, the fact that she could even cook was unexpected. Her *always-partying gyaru* looks made it difficult to imagine her doing something so homey.



“Should I... do something?” I asked.

“No, just wait.”

“Okay...”

I sat down on the couch and started playing with my phone. Kokoro Nishina, the school’s most popular gyaru, was cooking in my kitchen. *This is so weird.*

After a while, the delicious smell of her fried rice wafted toward me. *Having someone cook for you, and a girl at that, is really nice.*

“It’s ready!”

“Oh!” Kokoro put the dish on the table. It looked so good that you’d never think it was made with leftovers.

“Mom told me to cook for us as much as possible instead of buying meals, as practice for when I’ll have to cook for my husband.”

Is that why she cooked this?

“Thank you...”

“Hm? What’s wrong?” she asked me.

“No, it’s nothing.”

I had just realized how long it had been since I last ate a meal that someone had cooked just for me. Though I hadn’t really felt lonely since my family moved away, something as simple as sharing dinner with someone was more enjoyable than I remembered.

“I-It’s really good!” I said as soon as I’d swallowed my first bite. Compared to what I usually made for myself, Kokoro’s cooking was on another level.

It was moving, really. This was the first homemade meal I’d even had after months of convenience store and deli food, not to mention the edible-but-far-from-tasty things I cooked for myself.

“Really? I just threw it together.”

“No, really! It’s delicious! You’re a good cook!”

“N-Not at all! It’s just fried rice...” she answered, making me feel embarrassed

for trying to compliment her.

Did I go overboard? I was so excited by eating my first girl-made dinner that I praised her too much. I was afraid that I'd creeped her out.

When I looked at her face, however, she was blushing and staring at the floor.

Wait, is she embarrassed? For being praised? I guess she can be cute sometimes...

"S-So, anyway," she said, switching the topic, "tell me what's popular with otaku guys! I only know about *IMS*."

IMS, short for "IdolMaster Station," was a gacha game full of cute girl idols. It was so popular there's even an anime. I loved the franchise and I knew some girls liked it too, but I wasn't expecting Kokoro to be one of them.

"Okay. I guess the most popular one right now would be *FGO*."

"Oh! I hear about that a lot! My Twitter followers are *way* into it. I've never played it though."

FGO stood for "Final God 0," a fantasy battle mobile game. I was *way into it* myself, joining the masses of people on Twitter. Granted, most people just tweeted about how much money they wasted on gacha rolls...

"It's fun to play, and the characters are really cool. It's the game that my friends and I blow the most money on."

"I see. I guess I'll install it then, so I can start playing later," she said, immediately downloading the game. Seeing her behave like such a good student made me realize I was a better teacher than I thought.

"And also... This is a newer thing, but I really like VTubers."

"Oh, right! I hear about those a lot! There's that popular one, YS—what did it stand for? 'Yumeno☆Saki,' was it?"

"Exactly!" I replied.

Virtual YouTubers, VTubers for short, are digital avatars who appear in YouTube videos. Their movements are controlled by a real person, along with everything they say. Basically, YouTubers for otaku.

“My friends always talk about normal YouTubers, so I follow a few. Like Kenio. But I’ve never followed a VTuber, now that I think about it,” she said.

“In that case, it’ll be faster to just show you some. When we’re done with dinner we can go up to my room and use my computer to...” I said, and stopped.

Wait a second. Am I inviting Nishina to my room?

“Well, we’ve finished eating already! Let’s go!”

“I, uh, wait! Uhm... O-Okay...”

Is she really okay with being alone with me in my room?

Kokoro didn’t seem to mind the idea of entering a boy’s room at all, which confused me. But I couldn’t tell her I didn’t want a girl in there after being the one to suggest it. I ignored my pounding heart, tried to look as unfazed as possible, and stood up.

Even if she wasn’t my type, Kokoro was still a cute girl my age. Being alone with her in my bedroom was a bit too much...

Come on! I can’t get so worked up over every little thing! I’m supposed to be living with her!

“Wait here a second,” I told her as we reached my room.

“Huh? Okay...”

I squeezed round the door and hurried to make it presentable, sweeping the spicy manga and doujinshi off my desk and into a drawer.

Sure, she’s an otaku too, but these are for my eyes only.

“Okay, come in,” I said, and she followed me inside.

“Whoa. It’s a real otaku room!” She looked around, glancing at all the posters, figurines, and all the other merchandise that, admittedly, made for a stereotypical otaku bedroom.

Kokoro closed the door behind her, the ominous “click!” driving home the point that I was trapped inside with a girl. I tried not to think about it and turned my computer on.

“Let’s see...” I opened YouTube and found a video by the most well-known VTuber currently in existence, Yumeno☆Saki. “This one should do.”

“How’s it going, kiddos? Yumeno☆Saki here! Today I’ll be taking a peek at the game that’s been trending so much online...”

Kokoro’s eyes fixated on the screen as the VTuber began playing the game.

“Wow. Is there really a real person moving her?” she gawked, clearly impressed.

“Yeah. In Yumeno☆Saki’s case the name of the content creator isn’t public, but there’s rumors that it’s a young voice actor.”

“I can see why they’re popular with otaku boys! She’s so cute! Both her character design and her voice!”

Kokoro liked the videos more than I expected, so we went on to watch some more.

“I totally get it! These videos are hilarious, and Saki-chan is the cutest! I’ll follow her for sure,” Kokoro said after a while—but her gaze had moved to my shelves.

“I was just wondering but... are those doujinshi?”

I forgot to hide the ones on the shelves! Without taking them out, you could only see the spines, and very few people would be able to tell what they were. The possibility that *she’d* spot them hadn’t even crossed my mind.

“Y-Yeah, so what?” I said, with my best attempt to seem nonchalant.

“I buy a lot that are made for girls, but I’ve never read one of *these*. Can I see?”

“What?!”

I didn’t see that coming.

“You said you’d teach me about what’s in with boys, right? Aren’t doujinshi the *in* thing?” she pressed.

“Well, they are... B-But, you know, these are all for adults...”

“Well, *duh*! Aren’t most doujinshi?”

So she wants to look at them knowing they're lewd?! And she even had sexy figures in her closet... Is she secretly a pervert?!

"What's the matter? Don't tell me you're embarrassed or something? I showed you my figures! What's the big deal?"

"I-I didn't ask to see! You shoved them in my face! Fine, whatever!" I walked over to the shelf and picked out one of the more easily digestible volumes. Cute design, nice art, relatively wholesome content. I handed it to Kokoro.

"Here."

"Oh! This is *IMS*! It's super cute!" she gasped, opening it. If my memory serves me right, the story was about an idol falling in love with her manager. The art style was neat and clean, making it easy to read. However, even though it claimed to follow a pure, vanilla relationship, the main characters ended up in bed together. That was the whole point, after all.

I shouldn't have shown it to her... I grimaced, way too late to do anything about it.

"Oh! Boys' doujinshi just go all out..." she mumbled to herself, blushing as she read. She was taking a ridiculously long time to look at each individual page, shifting around uncomfortably as she did so.



“Th-This is so *lewd!*” she exclaimed. It was like watching a middle school boy read his first sexy magazine.

After she’d reached the middle of the story, she started flipping through faster. I thought that she’d had enough of it, but she suddenly shut the doujinshi and declared, “I’ll read the rest in my room!”

“In your room? You’re taking it with you?!”

“Can I just borrow a few more?”

“Do you have no sha— Sure, help yourself.”

“Then I’ll take this one... and this... Oh! This is YS! I’ll take this one too!” All in all, she’d stacked her arms with six steamy doujinshi, that pervert.

What exactly was she going to do with them in her room? *I-I’m not thinking of anything inappropriate, of course...*

“The bath’s ready to use, by the way. Do you want to go first?” I asked her as we walked out. I’d gone ahead and cleaned it before she arrived, so I’d rather Kokoro used it while it was still nice and shiny.

“Oh, okay! Thanks!” she said, going to her room to drop off her haul and get a change of clothes, before making for the bathroom.

I was slouching on the living room couch, attending to my usual otaku responsibilities (gacha games, VTuber videos, Twitter, and so forth), when she walked back out of the bathroom.

“I’m done!” she said.

She wore a fluffy, pink, low-cut pajama top and hotpants that showed off her pale thighs.

Her hair was still wet, of course, and her cheeks were flushed from the hot bath. With no makeup on, she had transformed into the perfect mix of sexy and cute.

Wh-What?! She looks ten times better without makeup!

I’d never seen her like this before, but she’d become dangerously close to my

type.

What am I thinking? That's still the same Nishina! A gyaru and bona fide fujoshi! I repeated inside my head, trying to drive away troubling thoughts while averting my eyes.

The entire room was now filled with the floral scent of her shampoo. It was more than I could take. I shot up and headed toward the bathroom myself.

"I'll be taking a bath now, so just... make yourself at home."

"Thanks!"

She was in here minutes ago... naked...

As I prepared to bathe, I noticed that the bathroom also smelled sweet, in a way it usually didn't. There were all sorts of strange new bottles near the mirror. Shampoo, conditioner, makeup remover, face wash... *Do girls need all this stuff just to take a bath?*

Except for my younger sister, this was obviously the first time a girl had bathed in my house. It took every fiber of my being to keep myself under control. From now on, even though we were just pretend-dating for Kokoro's parents, we were going to spend the night under the same roof, just the two of us. With all that had happened, I hadn't had time to properly process it.

Even though she wasn't my type—even if she *was* a fujoshi—I couldn't deny that Kokoro was incredibly beautiful.

Please give me the strength to survive all this.

I dried my hair, put on a sweatshirt and pants, and went back to the living room, where Kokoro was playing with her phone on the couch.

Since I told her to make herself at home, I thought that she'd already be in her room.

"I-Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I just thought that we still hadn't split chores and all that." She was unusually nervous.

“Oh, I guess you’re right.”

We quickly decided which chores we’d each take care of. Kokoro would do the laundry (so that I wouldn’t have to see her underwear), and I would clean the living room and the stairs. We’d take it in turns to make (or buy) dinner, and the person who didn’t cook would wash the dishes. As for breakfast, we’d each sort out our own.

On our days off school, we’d also take turns to clean the bathroom, and the same went for taking out the trash.

That was enough to start with. We’d discuss other chores when and if the need arose.

“That settles it for now. I’ll be going to sleep then,” I said.

“I...” Kokoro, fidgeting shyly, stumbled for words. “I really want to thank you for letting me stay. Thanks to you, I don’t have to leave Japan. I’ll help out as much as I can, promise!”

“O-Oh, sure! No problem.”

“I just wanted to say that. Good night!”

When was the last time someone said “good night” to me?

“Yeah. Good night,” I replied, as she got up and went to her room.

Was she waiting in the living room for me just so she could thank me? I guess she does have a sweet side after all...

* * *

The next day, Kokoro and I were talking while having breakfast.

“You should know already, but don’t tell anyone at school that I’m an otaku or say *anything* about me living with you! Got it?”

“I know, I know!”

“And since no one can find out, I can’t be seen going to school with you. That’d be the worst!” she said, leaving the house by herself.

Just as I was beginning to think that she wasn’t all that bad, she ruins it by saying something like that. *Is living with me really that embarrassing?!*

I could understand that she didn't want anyone to misunderstand and think we were dating—I wasn't much of a catch, after all—but since I was letting her stay in my home she could at least find a less offensive way to put it.

But then again, if people at school found out that we live together, the teachers might try to contact my parents, so maybe that's what she meant...

That day at school, I only ran into Kokoro once.

She was walking down the hallway surrounded by other flashy gyaru. Our eyes met, but we quickly looked away.

Nobody would ever believe that we lived in the same house. To be honest, I hardly believed it myself. Had we not met during that party in Akihabara, we probably would have never even talked to each other. That's just how different we were.

I came home slightly later than usual, and... *Huh?!*

"Oh! Welcome back."

I couldn't believe my eyes. Yumeno☆Saki, the popular VTuber, was in my living room.

This can't be true.

It wasn't true. Kokoro, cosplaying Yumeno☆Saki, the popular VTuber, was in my living room. She was standing in front of the mirror, clearly embarrassed at me seeing her.

She was wearing YS's costume, the pink wig, the makeup, and even blue contact lenses. It was as if YS had jumped out of the screen as a beautiful *real* girl. Although I knew that it was Kokoro, it was very hard to believe.

"What exactly are you doing?!"

"There was this cosplay shop in Ikebukuro, on my way back from school, and they had this YS costume and wig! She's really popular, huh? I couldn't resist and *had* to buy it!"

"A-And, why would that be?"

The sleeveless top and miniskirt, when worn by a real girl, revealed more skin than I could have imagined. I was having a hard time keeping my eyes on her face.

“I thought that maybe, the next time I go to an otaku party, I could cosplay! If Saki-chan is this popular with boys, looking like her would give me a head start!”

“So that’s why you bought that...”

“Honestly, I also just wanted to cosplay Saki-chan, since she’s super cute!”

“I didn’t know you were into cosplay.”

“I’ve never gone out in public, but sometimes I dress up in my room and take selfies. I really want to go to events like this, but there’s no way my friends would do it with me and I don’t want to go alone.”

“I see...”

This is such a tragedy! A cosplay this good shouldn’t be confined to someone’s room. The world deserves to see this Nishina☆Yumeno☆Saki!

If she actually went to an otaku party dressed like that, she’d instantly be surrounded by guys.

“Anyway, you showed me Saki-chan yesterday, so today I’ll be teaching you about the hottest titles for otaku girls!” she said excitedly, jumping in her cosplay.

“Okay, sure.”

“Can I use your PS4? I have Amazon Prime, so I can show you some of the anime I want to tell you about,” she asked, quickly proceeding to turn the console on and open an app.

“We’ve *got* to start with *Next Stage*!” she said, pointing out that it was the anime with the most female viewers this season.

“Knowing this one anime will be enough to talk for hours with most otaku girls, and it’s really good anyway!”

We sat together and began the first episode. Given the modest size of the

couch, we were sitting precariously close to each other...

I snuck the occasional glance in her direction. The more I looked at her cosplay, the more I thought about how revealing it was.

The lack of sleeves left her shoulders and armpits exposed, and the tight fit emphasized the size of her breasts. As if that wasn't enough, her pale thighs were peeking out from under the miniskirt. Even with all my restraint, I couldn't help but be painfully aware of how close she was.

Kokoro began explaining the anime over the opening theme.

"You probably know this much already, but *Next Stage* is based on a gacha game. A girl has just been made the manager for this group of super talented and handsome male idols. In the story, she..."

"Uh? Oh, uh-huh..."

Despite the issues that I had with Kokoro's personality, it wasn't bad sitting so close to a pretty girl who was cosplaying YS.

"...and the way they adapted it is so good! Isn't the animation perfect?! The story's really interesting, so even boys should like it..." She continued chattering without a break, but her cosplay was so distracting that I was having serious trouble concentrating on the show.

"Ah! Kaoru-chan!" she squealed all of a sudden, making me flinch.

"Wh-What?!"

"The boy with the blond hair! He's my favorite!"

I looked back at the screen and saw a handsome blond boy whose face I recognized. *This must be the character plastered all over that ita-bag she has...*

"His name's Kaoru Hashimoto, and he's a childhood friend of Yukito Fujimiya, the main idol. They used to be super close, but then they fell out. The reason, though, is that Kaoru thinks that Yukito did him wrong yeeears ago, but, get this, it's all because he's actually in love with him! He's a gay tsundere! Isn't that the cutest?!"

"Y-Yes..."

She was speaking faster and more excitedly than usual again, as her otaku instincts took over.

“Kaoru-chan!” she said, sighing. “Why is every move you make so cute?! I can’t take it!”

“This isn’t your first time watching this anime, right?”

“First? I’ve watched every single episode at least three times!”

“...”

“Ah! I love this scene! Ten out of ten Kaoru-chan fan service! It’s too sexy! I can already imagine the extras with him ***** their *** and ***** their ***** right into his ****!”

“Excuse me?!”

Kokoro was screaming all kinds of unfathomable words.

“He’s so hot! Like hotness in human form!”

“...op it...”

“Hm? Did you say something, Ichigaya?”

I finally snapped, losing all control of my temper.

“Stop it! I don’t care if you get into fujoshi rambling mode, but don’t do it while cosplaying Yumeno☆Saki! You’re killing Saki-chan!” The words raced from my heart to my mouth.

“But—”

“Even if your outfit is perfect and you look just like her, you’re ruining it all by talking like that! Try doing that during an otaku party and see what’ll happen! Sure, guys will swarm around you because you look just like Saki-chan, but the second you open your mouth they’ll get creeped out!”

“What...?!” She stared at me, surprised.

I couldn’t bear seeing a character I loved so much being tainted like that. Her cosplay was so visually perfect that it made it a thousand times worse.

“What are you talking about? If a cosplay is perfect, who cares about what the

cosplayer says?!” she said, pausing the anime.

“You can’t call it perfect if you do things the character never would! You have to *be* Yumeno☆Saki! You don’t get it! It’s the way otaku boys think!”

“I don’t get it...?”

“Yeah. I showed you videos, games, anime, and even my doujinshi! But you still don’t get it at all!”

She stared at me, her cheeks puffed out in anger.

“Oh yeah? Well I’ll show you!” she shouted, jumping to her feet and storming out of the living room like an anime villainess.

“Ah...”

Did I say too much? I couldn’t just keep quiet while she treated Saki-chan like that...

We didn’t speak any more that day. We ate dinner in our own rooms and went to bed.

The next day, too, we went to school without a single word to each other.

Thinking that maybe she was still mad, I didn’t feel good about going back home. So, after school, I went to Akihabara with my friends, and didn’t make it back until about 6 p.m. The lights were on, meaning Kokoro was already there.

I went up the stairs and nervously opened the door.

“Hi...” I began to say, but my eyes short-circuited my brain.

“How’s it going kiddo? Welcome back! It’s me, Yumeno☆Saki! Dinner’s ready!”

She was still cosplaying YS, just like the day before, but now she was even matching her voice and speech pattern.

“Huh? I, er...”

The table was already set with a dinner that looked delicious: fried pork cutlet, white rice and miso soup. The smell made me realize how starving I was.

What is going on here? Did she make this?

“Wait, did you...?”

“Go wash your hands and sit down! You’d better eat it before it’s cold!” she interrupted me.

I did as she told me, washing my hands like a child and sitting down on the couch in front of the table.

“Now, let’s eat!”

The whole situation was baffling. I was expecting her to be mad at me...

Is this a trap? Is the food poisoned or something?

“Hm? What’s wrong? Aren’t you gonna eat?” she asked, watching me as I sat motionless with my chopsticks in hand.

She wouldn’t go as far as poisoning me... right? I thought, picking up a slice of the pork cutlet.

As I bit into it, the tasty flavor of the meat melted into my mouth. It was heavenly. One bite was enough to tell that this was homemade. *Did she really cook it herself?*

“So? Is it yummy?”

“Yeah...”

The food was far from being poisoned. In fact, the dinner that the girl in the YS cosplay had cooked for me was one of the best things I’d ever tasted. How was something so unbelievable even happening?

Could it be that...?

The day before, I’d told her that she didn’t understand what otaku boys really thought: that the perfect cosplay was to *be* the character, not just look like them... *Did she take it to heart and try to become the perfect Yumeno☆Saki?*

YS wasn’t such an extraordinarily good cook though. This scenario, if anything, was much closer to one of my (adult-only) Yumeno☆Saki doujinshi—the one where she marries one of her fans.

Did Nishina use my doujinshi to study what otaku boys want and try to

replicate it in real life?

“Thank you for the meal.”

“How was it?”

“It was delicious...”

“Thanks, but that’s not what I meant! I mean, how did you like my Yumeno☆Saki cosplay?” she said, suddenly back to her normal voice. Apparently cosplay time was over.

“I, um... I guess it’s kind of better than yesterday’s.”

“You *guess? Kind of* better? But it was the perfect cosplay!” she exclaimed.

“Honestly, it’s still far from perfect. A real girl couldn’t compete with a fictional one anyway.”

She looked the part, and her voice was right, but Kokoro could never compare to the unspeakable grandeur of the actual Yumeno☆Saki.

“What?! People like you are the reason otaku are seen as creepy!”

“But you were the one who asked me what I thought!”

“Ugh! Then... how about this...?!” she said before rushing to her room and coming back with something in her hand.

“I-Is that an ear pick?!”

“*Ahem... One, two...*” she began tuning her voice to go back in character.

“Come here, don’t be shy! I’ll clean your ears!”

“You wh-what?! Why?!” I yelped in surprise.

“I saw an ear cleaning scene in one of your doujinshi! And out of all those YS videos, the one with the most views and positive comments was the ‘POV Ear Cleaning’ one! Now come here and let me clean your ears, and then you’ll see how perfect my cosplay is!” she demanded, blushing.

If I really had to admit it, that is my favorite YS video, but...

“And also,” she went on, “I read all the comments and saw that otaku boys love to have their ears cleaned by cute girls! So, when I find my ideal boyfriend,

I can clean his ears while cosplaying his favorite character!”

Am I some kind of training dummy?!

“Just hurry up and come here already!” she said, grabbing my shoulder and forcing my head onto her lap. Her skirt was so short that my face was directly in contact with her skin, which was smooth and soft against my cheek.

Oh. So this is what happiness feels like. Resting your head on a girl’s thighs... But anyway, what’s up with her? Was she so offended by what I said yesterday that she felt she had to prove herself?

“Tee-hee, how’s this? Does it feel good?” she asked me (in Yumeno☆Saki’s voice).

As much as I didn’t want to, I had to admit that her voice had a motherly ring to it, a quality that I’d never have guessed Kokoro could boast. My mental image of her was that of a loud, mouthy girl who drooled over yaoi hands and handsome two-dimensional dudes.

One of the best things about Yumeno☆Saki was that, despite being sixteen, she sometimes showed that tender motherly love that Kokoro was now succeeding in imitating.

Her ear cleaning technique, too, was gentle and pleasant. Between that and the feeling of her thigh against my face, I could only conclude that Heaven existed and that I was already in it.

As if that wasn’t enough, when I moved my gaze upwards, my eyes ran into her chest. If I so much as nodded, my head would have bumped into it.



I know that I'd just told her that she was far from perfect, but as far as cosplays go, I doubted that anyone could do much better. I was living the utter joy of having a pretty girl, with the same outfit and voice as my favorite character, doing her best to make me feel good. That was all that an otaku guy could wish for.

My student has learned so much in a single day, I thought, impressed, before realizing something very important.

All those doujinshi I lent her... they were adult-only stuff. She isn't going to try those things out in real life too... right? No way. She'd never do that. But, what if she wanted to start out by, like, just sleeping side by side in the same bed? Ahhh! What am I thinking?!

"Time's up!" she said, back to her normal voice again, shoving me physically off her thighs and mentally out of my delusions.

"So? Wasn't I just the perfect Saki right now?!" she asked, enthusiastically tugging at my tie.

"Hng... M-My throat..."

"I'm so perfect, all the otaku boys will fall head over heels for me, right?! Even the most handsome, perfect otaku boyfriend isn't out of my league anymore, right?!"

Don't taint Yumeno☆Saki's sacred clothes with such blasphemous words and violent behavior!

"Ichigaya? Answer me already!"

"You..."

"Uhm?"

"You don't get it at all!"

My angry scream echoed through the house.

* * *

After we'd washed up our plates, and each of us had taken a bath, Kokoro went to her room.

When it was almost midnight, time for my current favorite anime to air, I took my usual seat on the living room couch and switched on the TV.

“Oh, you’re still awake?” I heard a voice from behind me. It was Kokoro, who’d just walked in on me.

“Yeah. You too?”

“I just needed to use the bathroom. Why are you still up?”

“There’s an anime I always watch live,” I said.

“Oh! What’s it called?”

“It’s called ‘*PopKing*.’ It’s the anime that boys have rated highest this season, so maybe you could learn a thing or two from it.”

“I see. Welp, might as well watch it then!”

Kokoro, after going to the bathroom, came back to the living room and sat beside me on the sofa.

“*PopKing* is a rom-com with a bit of a twist, you could say...” I began explaining, since there was still time until the episode aired.

The anime was based on a light novel. It’s set in a high school where real popularity contests are held and the students are treated differently depending on how many votes they get from the opposite sex. The protagonist, at the start, isn’t really popular at all, but, with the help of a girl, he slowly climbs the popularity ranking, with all the expected rom-com antics.

“Oh, that sounds fun,” Kokoro commented.

“But the most popular character with fans, even more popular than the heroine, is this girl with the blue bob haircut. Her name is Ringo Sasame, and...” I continued explaining the intricacies of *PopKing* while the opening played on the screen.

Ringo Sasame was a childhood friend of the protagonist. Anyone could tell right from the first episode that it wasn’t going to end well for her. You could say that she was a character destined to fail from the start. Despite that—or maybe, because of that—Ringo was even more popular among fans than the main heroine was. She was the pure, loyal kind of childhood friend who was

kind to the protagonist right from the start.

“There are looads of factors to her popularity: she’s cute, of course, and then she’s voiced by Hanazawa, but personally I think that the main reason is that, unlike the heroine—who at the start doesn’t like the protagonist—she’s always looked after him, even when he wasn’t popular at all, and she fancied him, obviously, and also she’s everything a childhood friend needs to be, like she goes to his house every morning, she makes his bento, and even cooks his dinner—since he lives by himself—so she’s, like, the perfect childhood friend but *everyone* knows that the protagonist will actually choose the heroine in the end, but when you think about it, the reason that there are so many caring, childhood friend characters in anime is that people like the concept—no, they love it—because—”

“Shush! I can’t hear the TV!” Kokoro hissed.

“Huh?! But I was trying to explain why it’s so popular!”

“I got that. I guess you do have a point though. Caring childhood friends, huh?” Kokoro mumbled, still staring at the screen.

“Is it really that good to have a girl take care of you?” she asked.

“Of course it is! It’s the greatest thing in the world!”

“Oh, okay...”

Once *PopKing* was over, Kokoro said that she wanted to watch the whole series. Thankfully, I had it all recorded, so I showed it to her from the first episode.

I kept giving her my explanations, and though she kept telling me to shut up, sometimes she also asked me questions, so I could tell that she was genuinely interested.

“You really have no idea how popular Ringo is. There’s sooo much fanart on Pixiv. Men are suckers for girls like that.”

“Wow. She’s a real hit...”

“Yeah. She might even be more popular than Yumeno☆Saki.”

“Oh?”

We stayed up really late, watching *PopKing* while I explained it, until Kokoro caught up with the latest episode.

Promising her that I'd help her was one thing, but staying up until 3 a.m. watching anime for her? I'm too kind... But, to be honest, being able to talk about a show I love is fun.

I had to give it to Kokoro that she was really putting in the effort to reach her goal. I just wished she'd direct those efforts a bit better...

4

The next morning.

I could hear my alarm going off, but my eyelids felt way heavier than usual. I shouldn't have been surprised after staying up so late with Kokoro...

I was idly dreaming of the previous night, when I heard someone scold me.

"How long are you going to lie there?! Wake up, you dummy!"

"Huh?" I jumped, surprised by the typical tsundere voice, blinking my room into focus. My eyes met with Kokoro, looking down on me with her hand on my bed covers.

"Wh-What are you doing in my room?!"

"Can't you be a bit more responsible? You're a high schooler now! Why do I still have to come here and wake you up every day?"

"E-Excuse me?"

This was, beyond any doubt, the very first time that she'd ever woken me up. And what was up with her voice?

"Breakfast is ready, so hurry up and change!"

"I, uh, what? Wait!" I stammered, but Kokoro had already stormed out of my room.

I got dressed and went to the living room, where an even bigger surprise was waiting for me on the table. Grilled salmon, scrambled eggs, white rice, and miso soup. Breakfast was, indeed, ready, and it looked amazing.

Our rule had been to make our own breakfasts, so all I usually ate in the morning were leftovers from the previous day's dinner or snacks from the convenience store.

"You made all this?" I asked Kokoro, who was standing in the kitchen with an apron over her uniform.

“I have to—you won’t eat a proper breakfast by yourself!”

“What’s your problem?! You woke me up, and now this? What are you even trying to do?!” I roared, my gratefulness somehow turning into anger. Being treated like this for no reason, rather than pleasant, was just scary.

“Sheesh... I’m trying my best to play the part and you just *have* to go out of character, don’t you?” Kokoro, back to her normal voice, said with a sigh.

“What?”

“Why are you so dense? It was you who told me yesterday that Ringo was the most popular character, right? So I just tried being her instead! How could you not get it after I’ve already done the same thing with Yumeno☆Saki?”

Now that I thought about it, this was exactly like Ringo from *PopKing*.

“So *that’s* what you were trying to do...”

Wasn’t YS enough? I thought she’d give up trying.

“And that thing about otaku boys liking childhood friend characters—I think I got it. I mean, if I were a guy, I’d like someone like Ringo too, who always looked after me like this,” she said.

It had become obvious that she wasn’t just pretending to be interested. She’d really learned a lot from watching *PopKing*.

“Now let’s hurry up and eat, or we’ll be late for school!” she said, switching back to the tsundere/Ringo voice.

“Uh, sure. Thanks,” I replied, and started eating.

“It’s so good!” I said, blown away by her breakfast.

“Oh, I almost forgot. Here!” Kokoro said, taking something out of the fridge and handing it to me.

“A bento?”

“It’s a balanced meal, so make sure to eat all of it!”

In *PopKing*, Ringo always prepared the protagonist’s bento, but I didn’t think that Kokoro would go that far.

“Th-Thank you...” I said, surprised, taking the lunchbox. Needless to say, it was the first time anyone other than my mom had ever made me a bento.

“Now get to school!” she said.

“What? But it’s thirty minutes earlier than the time I usually leave—”

“I have to change, take off this wig, *and* fix my hair! That takes time! So go!” Kokoro demanded. Not a single shred of Ringo left.

“Isn’t that *your* problem?! Why do *I* have to leave earlier?!”

“You’re all ready! Why do you even care?!” she said, practically kicking me out of my own house. I was surprised by all the trouble she’d gone through to mimic a perfect otaku girlfriend, but still, what she was doing didn’t seem very rational.

You can learn what otaku boys like from Ringo, sure, but do you really need to roleplay her like that? It was a bit crazy.

That being said, having a girl wake me up and cook me breakfast *and* make me a bento, even if that girl was Kokoro... it wasn’t half bad.

* * *

I’d just sat at my desk, still taking my books out of my bag, when Takeshi Aisaki, my classmate and friend, approached me.

“Morning, Kagetora.”

“Oh, Ai. Mornin’.”

He was the only one in my class I could talk about otaku stuff with.

His name, Takeshi, literally meant “fierce,” but he looked, sounded, and acted in such a soft, charming way that all of his friends (including me) thought it made more sense to call him by the first letters of his surname: Ai. It sounded more like a girl’s name, but that was the point—he was cute, just like a girl.

“You look awful today,” he said.

“What’s that supposed to mean? Isn’t it a bit early for insults?”

“I’m only pointing out that impressive pair of dark circles under your eyes. Were you up late watching VTubers again?”

He asked because it was something that he'd do himself. Ai was also an otaku. The annoying part was that he still had tons of female friends, despite making no secret of his hobbies. It had to be down to his cute appearance and mannerisms... Obviously, I hated him for it.

Notably, there was one exception to his *cute mannerisms*, namely that when he was talking with other boys, and me in particular, he would say the harshest things without batting an eyelid.

"Not really, no..." I replied.

The real reason why I'd stayed up so late was that I'd been marathoning *PopKing* with Kokoro, but I couldn't tell him that. The fact that we lived together had to be kept secret, at all costs.

"Oh, so I take it you still haven't heard about the latest VTuber phenomenon, Emily Saionji. She only set up her channel yesterday and she already has tons of followers. Everyone's talking about her," he said, showing me a picture of said VTuber on his phone. She was a beautiful girl with blonde hair and blue eyes.

"First I ever heard of her, but wow. She's cute."

"She's supposed to be half-Japanese, half-English, and the person voicing her is also bilingual. Since she's fluent in both languages, she's also gaining a ton of followers from overseas. Her voice is really cute too, so it's probably a young voice actress reading the lines. Oh, and she belongs to the same company as Yumeno☆Saki, so the production value really shows. Papa did a good job with that character design..."

"A half-English character that can actually speak English? That's pretty rare. You're always up to date though, aren't you?" I said, already planning my binge on Emily's videos after school.

"With all the VTuber fans on Twitter and stuff, you end up knowing whether you want to or not. Oh, I almost forgot! Check this out. It's from my last con," he said, swiping to another picture.

"Huh?!" I exclaimed, snorting with laughter.

It was a photo of a cosplayer dressed up as a popular character from *FGO*. The *character* was a cute girl, but not this cosplayer. The cosplayer wasn't even a

girl, cute or otherwise—it was Ai.

“Someone put my picture on the ‘Cutest Cosplay Girls From Anime FestiCon 2018’ thread—again. I pulled it off so well that except for you and anyone else that knows me, everyone thinks I’m a girl!”



“Dammit, Ai. Of all the characters you could choose... and what’s with all that skin you’re showing?!”

Ai wore guys’ clothes most of the time, but he liked to crossdress. His crossdressing, however, was strictly limited to cosplay. He was what people called a “crossplayer.”

He wasn’t bad at it either. His female characters were so convincing that he’d gained a pretty substantial following as a crossplayer, with more than ten thousand followers on Twitter.

In the picture he’d just shown me, he was wearing a white bob cut wig, cosplaying *FGO*’s heroine in her fighting suit. The costume showed his arms *and* his thighs.

Seeing my male friend dressed like that always threw me for a loop, and the fact that he was actually cute just made it worse. How was I supposed to react?

“Hm? Kagetora? What’s up? You fall in love with my cosplay or something?”

“As if!”

“I wouldn’t blame you if you did. Even I’m surprised that it came out this cute. If you want to see it in person, you’re always invited to come to a convention with me,” Ai said.

“Why would I want to do that? Your middle-aged, camera-wielding stalkers will get jealous. You know how obsessive those guys can be! They’re all over your Twitter!”

You just needed a glance at his account to find another creep, stalking him day in and day out.

“Do you check my profile that often? That’s unexpected...”

“Of course I don’t! Your stuff just comes up on my timeline! That’s all!”

He laughed with that irritating charm. “The fans aren’t that bad though. I just ignore the weird ones and block the scary ones. The worst ones are those weirdos sliding into my DMs asking if I want to meet them IRL. I’d reply if they were other cosplayers wanting to go to a con with matching outfits or something but...”

“I guess being a popular cosplayer is hard work.”

So... cosplayers meet each other like that? Matching their outfits at conventions? Not that I was a cosplayer or anything, but it was interesting all the same.

“Say, Ai... Do cosplayers end up, you know, dating each other after going to cons together?” I asked, unable to contain my curiosity.

“Oh, sure, that happens. There’s this cosplayer girl, a friend of mine, who recently hooked up with a guy just like that.”

“For real?!”

“You aren’t thinking of cosplaying just to get a girlfriend, are you?” he asked.

“I’m thinking no such thing!”

It did sound like an interesting prospect, but I didn’t have the guts to do something like that in the first place, nor did I have the looks to pull it off. And I didn’t want to be one of those guys who pretends to be into something just to pick up girls...

Our conversation was brought to an end when our homeroom teacher entered the room, starting the class.

When morning classes were over, we began eating lunch.

“You brought a bento?! Now *that’s* rare!” said Ai, ogling my food rather than his own.

“Well, you know, I figured that every once in a while...”

I opened up the box and looked at what Kokoro had prepared for me. It was a textbook example of bento. It had rice on the left side, and on the right it had rolled omelet, cherry tomatoes, spinach, and fried fish sausage.

“And it’s all homemade?! I knew that you cooked, but I’m pretty shocked you’re so good at it,” Ai commented.

“Haha... I guess so...”

It looked good, sure, but where was the meat? How was I supposed to eat

lunch without any meat?

“Kagetora?”

“Ah, I’ll just go buy some fried chicken real quick!” I said.

“What? Isn’t that bento enough? Well, I guess that’s too much rice to eat without meat.”

I felt kind of bad buying more food, as if Kokoro’s bento wasn’t enough, but everyone knows that meat is the most important part of a guy’s diet.

* * *

The school day was over, so I headed back home.

“Hi...”

“Hi there,” Kokoro, who was playing with her phone on the couch, still in her uniform. She must have been done with roleplaying Ringo.

“So? What did you think?” she asked.

“Huh? You mean the bento?”

“Well, that too, but I mean in general! You said that boys like girls like Ringo so... H-How was I? Would that make an otaku guy happy?” she asked, blushing.

This morning she acted like it was the most natural thing in the world, and now she’s blushing?!

“Well, you stayed in character all the way through, and you really sounded like an anime childhood friend. It was good,” I admitted, and she grinned.

“Hah! See? When I put my mind to it, I can totally become the perfect girlfriend!”

She gets carried away way too easily...

“Oh, and... thanks for the bento,” I said, taking the empty box out of my bag and rinsing it in the kitchen sink.

“Sure... Did you like that too?”

“Y-Yes... It was tasty,” I said. It wasn’t exactly a lie, but I was scared that, if I told the whole truth, she’d go all “*You ungrateful jerk!*” on me. *Then again, if*

she's going to cook me bento again in future, it'd be better to be honest with her...

"It's just... maybe it'd be even better if it had some meat in it," I said, carefully choosing my words.

"What?! You ungrateful jerk! I even made it all healthy and stuff!"

Oh, c'mon! She was the one who asked for my opinion!

"Yes, healthy, of course..." I mumbled, heading for my room to change before the conversation turned into an argument.

"Oh, and," she stopped me, "I'll be cooking dinner for the rest of the week."

"What? Why?" I asked. *We'd already agreed on taking turns each day...*

"Yesterday you said that otaku boys like it when girls take care of them, right? There were loads of scenes with Ringo cooking in *PopKing*, too. So I want to get super good at cooking before I get a boyfriend!" she said.

"O-Oh, okay then. So I just have to do the dishes?"

"Yeah."

Kokoro went out by herself for groceries, while I stayed in my room playing gacha games.

At around 7 p.m., I heard her call out to me from the living room.

"Dinner's ready!"

I went downstairs and found a meal waiting for me on the table. It was a hamburger steak topped with a fried egg.

"It looks delicious!" I said, sitting down. "Did you cook this because of what I said about meat earlier?"

"I-It's not *just* that, I mean... I just thought that if boys like meat then I should practice cooking it," she replied.

And to think she'd sounded mad when I told her.

"It *is* delicious!" I said after taking a bite. I wasn't exaggerating, either. The cheap hamburger steaks I ordered sometimes at family restaurants had nothing

on this.

I was pretty hungry to begin with, so it didn't take long for me to empty my plate.

"O-Oh... You really liked it, huh?" Kokoro commented.

"Yeah! It was great!" I replied, finally noticing that she'd been staring at me the whole time.

After dinner, while I was doing the dishes, Kokoro sat on the couch, looking up something on her phone.

"Now I've learned a bit about otaku guys," she said once I was done, "I just *have* to look for a place where I can actually meet some, but... it's not so easy."

She showed me a webpage with a list of parties similar to the one we'd met at.

"Hm? Why not?" I asked.

"You see all these? There's loads of them, but not a single one of them admits *anyone* underage!"

"Oh, that's what you meant. Yeah, it's difficult to find parties that you can join as a high schooler."

The otaku party where I first met Kokoro was an exception, and it had taken me half a year to find it. I'd been looking for a girlfriend for a while, so I used to check those kinds of websites every day. Most only accepted participants aged twenty and up, and you had to be eighteen to even join the less strict ones.

"What's the point of working so hard if I can't meet a single otaku guy?" she said, sighing. "It'd be easy if I just, you know, had a friend who could hook me up with someone, like my friends do. But you said you don't have any otaku friends, right?"

"None that'd meet your standards, at least. And most of them are online friends, except for Aisaki—"

"Aisaki?! So you do have real otaku friends! What kind of guy is he?"

“Hm, he’s a classmate of mine. He’s just slightly taller than you and he’s the cutesy, overconfident type,” I said.

“That’s not really my type, yeah...” she said, clearly disappointed.

Was she still counting on me introducing her to someone?

“What about you though?” I asked. “Don’t you have any female otaku friends?”

“I already told you I don’t! Maybe there’s some on Twitter, but I’ve never met any of them...”

So I can’t count on her introducing me to someone either...

“Oh, right, about Aisaki—he’s a cosplayer, actually, just like you. He only cosplays girl characters, but he’s kind of low-key famous in that niche.”

“Really?! He’s a crossplayer?!”

Even imagining Kokoro and Ai cosplaying together... They’d be really popular.

“Yeah. And he said that a girl he knows found a boyfriend by meeting up with another cosplayer.”

“A-Are you serious?!” she gasped, so excited that she sprung up from the couch.

“Why didn’t I think of that?! I should set up a cosplay Twitter account and ask super hot cosplayers to pair up with me! I have some outfits that are popular with guys, so that could work!” she said.

“Super hot cosplayers...?”

“Yep! There’s a cosplayer I love who’s so handsome and always has awesome costumes! He has, like, twenty thousand followers, and I’ve been a fan of his for a year now!”

Would she go through all that trouble just to meet a cosplayer? She must be really desperate. Or maybe it’s me who should be more motivated...

“But you said you already have an account. Don’t you post your cosplay pics on there?” I asked her.

“Sometimes I do, but I only have a handful of followers, and my account is

private anyway. I need a new one!”

“But why would you keep your account private?”

When you make your account private, only your followers can see what you post.

“Because I don’t want my friends or my parents to know that I’m an otaku! I’d totally get found out if they saw my cosplay pics!” she explained.

Oh, right, she’s still hiding the fact that she’s an otaku.

“But then making a cosplay account would be pointless. If you make it public, people will find out you’re an otaku, and if you make it private, you won’t find any new followers.”

“It’ll be fine!” she said. “I just need to make sure that people can’t recognize me!”

“How’s that work?”

“Even if they see my cosplay, it’ll be okay as long as they can’t tell that *I’m* the girl in the picture. I’d already be wearing a wig, makeup, and colored contacts, so I’d just need to retouch them a little bit to make it even harder to tell!”

“You can edit photos like that?”

“Sure! You just need an app! It’s not even that hard! Okay, now that I know what to do, there’s no time to lose! I already have a couple of cute outfits with me... Oooh, and I also need some full body pics, so can you take them for me?”

I was impressed by how quickly she put whatever she planned into practice. *I wish I were more like her...*

“I can help you take them, but if that’s your plan for finding a boyfriend, what am I supposed to do? How am I going to find a girlfriend?” I moaned, feeling completely left out.

“You could cosplay too! There aren’t that many male cosplayers, and if you became a mega hot one with awesome costumes, you’d be super popular with otaku girls!”

“Have you considered that I may not have been blessed with the best of

looks?”

She took a long look at my face, then looked away.

Hey! Don't be that obvious! I have feelings too!

Unconcerned, she scurried away to her room, preparing for her photo shoot.

A while later...

“What do you think?! I'm Megumi from *Saekano!*” Kokoro said when she came back. I was lost for words.

Megumi Kato was the protagonist of *Saekano: How to Raise a Boring Girlfriend*. It was a popular light novel series that also had an anime adaptation.

Kokoro had nailed Megumi's pure and innocent look: a red cardigan over a white dress and a short, brown wig with a beret. It took everything I had to hide my excitement toward seeing a character that I happened to love. It looked as if Megumi had jumped right out of the screen and into my living room. Yesterday's Yumeno☆Saki cosplay, in all its unapologetically unrealistic otakuness, looked amazing on Kokoro, but so did this tamer, more innocent-looking one.

“Weren't you supposed to know nothing about anime that guys like?” I asked her.

“I just caught an episode of *Saekano* on TV and I got really into it, so I went and bought the costume for my favorite character! Anyway, can you take those pictures?”

“Uhm, sure...”

“As for the background... Hm... Okay, let's do it here, where there's just this wall!” she said, sitting on the couch with her back to the wall and handing me her phone. It was open on an app I'd never heard of: “SNOW.” Kokoro was already a beautiful girl, but the filters in this app made her almost ridiculous.

“Make sure I look cute! I'll check them at the end!” she said.

“Okay then,” I replied, taken aback by how stuck-up she was being.

I put my finger on the shutter button. For an otaku, being able to take pictures of a pretty girl cosplaying a character you love was such a delight that I barely believed it was happening to me, but I had to contain myself. If I let my hands shake too much, the pictures would just come out blurry.

So I steadied myself and started taking pictures, one after another, as Kokoro shifted through various poses.

“Hm, I’m not really feeling this one anymore...” she said, completely switching to a position where her elbows rested on the table in front of her.

Leaning forward like that, with her dress pulled down tight over her cleavage, made her boobs look remarkably bigger. I was sure that if she bent any further, she’d be showing me her bra.

Huff... wow... sh-should I tell her? I thought to myself, but I didn’t have the courage. She’d probably just tell me that I’m a pervert and not to look at her boobs...

It’s hard to notice in her uniform and stuff, but Nishina’s boobs are pretty big, huh...

“I’ll sit on the floor next!”

“O-Okay!”

She sat directly on the floor and I resumed my duties as cameraman, taking even more pictures while trying not to sweat.

That dress she’s wearing... it’s really short. I can see some bare thigh between the hem and the top of those stockings... I wonder if she’s wearing shorts underneath—wait, w-what am I thinking?! If she knew I was thinking of stuff like this, I wouldn’t hear the end of it...

“Looking cute isn’t as easy as I thought,” she said as she crossed and uncrossed her legs. Every time she did, however, her very short dress flapped in such a way that I was dangerously close to seeing her underwear. There was no way I could concentrate on taking pictures anymore.

That dress has ridden so high up her thighs and I still haven’t glimpsed any shorts... maybe, she’s not even wearing any?!

Next, she pulled up her knees, hugging her legs to her chest. *If she does that, I'm definitely going to see her panties!*

"Ah!" she said, realizing her mistake and quickly straightening her legs, holding her skirt down.

"Y-You didn't see anything, did you?" she asked me nervously, blood rushing to her cheeks.

So she really isn't covering her panties with shorts?!

"I-I didn't! I didn't see anything at all!" I replied, furiously shaking my head.

"Just show me the pictures you've taken so far!" she said, her voice a noticeably higher pitch as she yanked the phone from my hand.

Nice way to treat someone who's doing you a favor, I thought, being careful not to actually say it aloud.

"No way! They look terrible! You could have changed the lighting or moved around a bit or something!"

"Huh?! What are you talking about! They look perfect!"

"This is even worse than taking selfies! And—Hey! My dress is so low in this one! Why didn't you tell me?!" she said, flustered, as she looked at her elbows-on-the-table picture.

"But I, uh... you know..."

"M-my boobs were so close to showing! You should have told me!" I'd never seen her face so red. She was probably as angry as she was embarrassed.

"You were the one leaning all over the table like that! It's not like I told you to!"

"Dammit! I should never have asked for help from *you*!"

"And that's how you thank someone for helping you?!"

"Don't worry, because I'm never asking you for help ever again!" she said, storming up the stairs and into her room.

Talk about ungrateful...

Alone with my thoughts, I wondered if it was true that getting to meet a handsome male cosplayer was as easy as uploading a couple of pictures to Twitter.

Were I born with a handsome face and chiseled jaw, I'd be able to become a cosplayer and get all the girls I wanted. Well, I wouldn't even need to cosplay, actually. I'd be fighting them off to begin with. Yeah... dreaming won't get me anywhere.

"I did it! I made it look super cute!" Kokoro, several minutes later, came back into the living room and rammed her phone under my nose.

Wasn't she mad at me? Has she changed her mind already?

"Whoa..." I gaped, staring at the cosplayer on the screen. You couldn't even tell it was her.

She had made her eyes unnaturally bigger and brighter, her eyelashes longer, and her fake hair even shinier. The real Kokoro was a beautiful girl, but after all this post-processing she looked so flawless you'd think it was all CG.

"What do you think? Isn't it the cutest of cute?!" she asked.

"It's a bit unnatural. It doesn't even look like a human."

"But you can't tell it's me, right?"

"I'll give you that..."

"Perfect! Now I just need to create that account and post today's pictures! Then I'll get to know Bambi, my favorite cosplayer, and we'll go out together, and..." she continued yapping about how perfectly her plan was going to unfold.

I looked at her in silence. She was so desperate to get a boyfriend that she'd somehow left creepy behind. There was possibly even something a little inspiring about her passion.

Unfortunately, Kokoro's cosplaying plan wouldn't work for me. *Passion won't make me handsome...*

One week later, after dinner.

“Look, Ichigaya! I got over a thousand followers! It’s amazing, right?!”

Kokoro showed me her Twitter profile.

“I started uploading cosplay videos, and they get tons of likes!” she said.

“Oh. That’s great.”

“Another cosplayer even invited me to pair up with her! You know Yuuki Aito, the VTuber, right? She cosplays her, and she’s so cute! So I’m going to cosplay YS and she’s going to cosplay Yuuki and we can take pictures together and stuff!”

Yuuki Aito was another popular VTuber, second in number of followers on YouTube, right after Yumeno☆Saki. Even Ai cosplayed her once. Unlike YS, however, she was a more tomboyish kind of character. The idea of seeing two VTuber cosplayers together sounded like a lot of fun, and I definitely wanted to see pictures of that, but...

“...and I’m totally on my way to becoming a proper cosplayer, you know?! There are sooo many characters I want to be! But I’ve only dressed up at home so far, so I want to go to a con next! Then I get to meet my followers! Won’t you come with me? You can be my cameraman! Going by myself is a bit too scary, you know?”

“Er, Nishina... What about your plan?”

“Huh? Plan?” she asked, genuinely confused.

Did she forget about why she was doing all this?!

“Your plan to find an otaku boyfriend! Isn’t that why you made that cosplay account in the first place?”

“I...” she mumbled, as distress spread over her face. “I didn’t forget about it! But when I followed Bambi, he didn’t follow me back. There’s this clique of cosplayers and they’re always chatting between themselves, so I can’t just barge into the conversation. And his fans treat him like he’s God or something! Imagine what they’d do if an unknown cosplayer like me invited him to pair up for a photo shoot! Also, if he said no, it’d make me so depressed...”

“But then wasn’t this cosplaying thing pointless?”

“N-Not at all! I’m having fun doing it and I even made some female otaku friends!” she said, as if she wanted to convince herself more than she did me.

“I think you’re losing sight of the objective here.”

“M-Mind your own business! I like doing this! I’m having fun, so who cares?!” she snapped angrily, holding back tears.

Just as I thought, cosplaying to find a boyfriend was a bad idea. With all that effort she’d put into it... I feel kind of sorry for her.

5

A few days later, at school, during lunch break.

I took my bento out of my bag—another bento that Kokoro had made for me. This was the first time she'd given me one after I'd commented about the lack of meat.

Taking off the lid, I saw bacon wrapped vegetables, steamed dumplings, wieners, and broccoli.

Now this looks delicious! And it's full of meat!

"I thought your last bento was a bit light, but you really didn't hold back this time, huh?" Ai commented.

"H-Haha, I guess so!" I said.

Kokoro had gotten mad at me when I gave her my honest opinion about the bento she'd made, but it seemed like she'd actually taken my advice about boys' tastes. She complained a lot, but in the end she always tried out my suggestions... She'd even started cooking dinner every day, after all.

* * *

Later that night.

"Hey there! VTuber Emily Saionji here! Today I *had* to pick up this new game!"

I was in my room, watching VTuber videos on my PC as usual. At that time, I was following around a dozen of them, and every night, before going to bed, I watched their latest videos.

After Ai had told me about Emily, she'd quickly become my new favorite.

She was tall and slender, with blonde hair and blue eyes. She was also half-Japanese, half-English, and since the person voicing her could actually speak both languages, her fanbase had already grown a lot overseas. What I liked the most about her was that she loved otaku culture, but she had one particular love that caught my attention the most: yuri.

In the video I was watching right now, she was playing an idol game, and you could tell from her reactions just how much she enjoyed seeing girls falling in love with each other.

“Kei-chan is tsundere’ing it up! Yeah! Praise be! That cheeky liar, I bet she’s actually worried about Akane! Come on!”

Rumor has it that VTubers managed by corporations usually have a script to follow, but she sounded way too excited to just be reading some lines.

A pretty half-Japanese girl drooling over yuri? It’s so... disgraceful. I love it.

“Eeek! M-My heart! Did you hear that just now?! Did you?! Kei-sama, we don’t deserve you!”

She was particularly fond of Kei Fukanuma, one of the “cool” girls. Every time Kei appeared on screen, Emily screeched and squealed in delight. Most of the comments below the video were along the lines of: “RIP headphone users,” “Emily? More like Screamily,” “A lady of fine yuri taste indeed,” and so on.

“If only a girl like this existed in real life...” I murmured to myself, knowing how unlikely that was. The virtual world allows us to enjoy girls as perfect as Emily whenever we want, but, in real life, they’re incredibly rare.

I started fantasizing about the girl behind the avatar. All I knew about her is that she was bilingual, had a beautiful voice, and liked yuri. VTubers didn’t usually reveal their true identities, but the mystery of it all just made me even more curious.

The next day.

“Have you even tried to look for places to find a girl yet?” Kokoro asked me while we were eating breakfast.

“I’ve been looking... I just haven’t found anything that a high schooler can join. And what about you? Have you given up on using your cosplay account to meet boys?”

“As if you could even meet a boy like that! That’s total garbage!” she scoffed.

“And anyway,” she continued, abruptly changing the subject, “are you free

after school today? I want to have a strategy meeting in the cafeteria.”

“Why in the cafeteria? Can’t we just do that at home?”

Discussing our dating strategies in the cafeteria was just asking to be overheard by someone.

“I’ve booked an appointment at a nail parlor near school, so I have two hours to kill...”

“Isn’t that, you know, *your* problem?”

“C’mon, if we can discuss it at home, we might as well discuss it at school. It’s no big deal! We just have to split up before we walk back.”

“Fine, I guess...”

The next day, after school.

In the cafeteria, Kokoro and I were eating desserts while looking for places to meet potential dates.

“Nothing... again. You have to be an adult to join all of these parties,” she sighed at her phone. There wasn’t anyone around us, so we could talk freely about our plans.

“Yeah. They serve alcohol at all of them,” I said, but my eyes had begun following two girls that were walking by us.

I don’t think I’d ever seen them before then, so they were probably from a different year. They belonged to the popular, short-skirt-wearing variety of girl, but... my jaw dropped when I really looked at one of them.

She had long, silky blonde hair, and her face didn’t look 100% Japanese. She was relatively tall, and her skin was pale and smooth. Her ample chest rested on top of a very slim waist and two incredibly long legs, which could only be compared to that of a fashion model. She was gorgeous.

“I-Is that girl... a foreigner?” I whispered, mostly to myself, after the two girls were well out of earshot.

“What? You’ve not seen Minami before? She’s, like, the most popular first

year in the whole school,” Kokoro replied.

“Really?! But I’ve never seen her before.”

“Do you live under a rock or something?!”

“S-So, is she a foreigner?”

“She’s half Japanese, half English, so her full name is actually Elena Minami-Williams. I don’t know the details, but people say that she’s signed up with some sort of entertainment company. It kind of figures. With those looks, she’s probably a model or something.”

“Word...” I said, totally convinced. She could definitely be a model. Unfortunately, that level of beauty made her so unapproachable that I could never even dream of talking to her.

Just as we finished talking about her, Elena and her friend came back into the cafeteria. They had shopping bags in their hands, so they’d probably bought something to eat at the convenience store nearby.

They sat away from us and started talking.

“Sheesh, I’m totally spent,” the non-Elena girl said. The place was now empty except for the two girls, Kokoro, and me, so we could easily hear what they were talking about.

“Ugh, now we can’t talk about otaku stuff in here anymore,” Kokoro whispered to me.

“But they’re in a different year. Does it really matter?” I asked her, whispering back.

“Of course it does! Gossip spreads like crazy around here!” she retorted.

In the meantime, I couldn’t help but listen in on the two girls’ conversation.

“Have you been busy with work lately, Elena?”

“Kind of. I have to go to the company headquarters again this week.”

“Oh. Are you gonna be on TV? Or like a magazine or something?”

“S-Sorry... I just can’t talk about it. It’s in my contract.”

Hm? Haven't I heard this voice before? This clear, ringing voice... Beautiful, but peculiar... and that intonation...

"Right, right. Non-disclosure and all that. Must be a pain, huh? But can't you just tell me if you're acting or modeling?"

"I, uh... I'm acting, I guess? But it's not TV or any major role like that, so you probably wouldn't know it even if I could tell you."

"Too bad. But maybe one day you'll be on TV, who knows?"

"I wonder... Oh, my phone! It's from work! I have to take this, sorry!" Elena said, standing up from her seat.

I saw her running through the cafeteria, past us, with her phone in her hand. Her familiar voice had made me so curious that my eyes followed her against my will.

Then, I glimpsed the words on her phone...

Incoming Call: Up-Load

My suspicions were confirmed. I stood up and went after her.

"Ichigaya? Where are you going?!"

"Hello... Tomorrow? As long as it's after 6 p.m., I can... Oh, that would be perfect! I'll see you at HQ then... Right now? I'm at school, but there's nobody around, don't worry..."

I followed Elena to an empty hallway, overhearing her phone call. I hadn't planned on eavesdropping, though, so I froze in place, unsure of what to do with myself.

Then, Elena noticed me and, for a second, she froze too, wide-eyed, but she continued to speak.

"...N-No, it's nothing. There's no one around. I'll see you tomorrow, sir. Goodbye," she said, putting away her phone and staring at me with a concerned expression.

"S-Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop or anything..." I hurried to explain

myself.

“It’s okay,” she said, before slightly bowing her head and turning to hurry away.

I’d ran after her because there was something I needed to ask her at all costs, but, after hearing what she’d said on the phone, I realized that my question wasn’t one that she was likely to reply to.

But if I don’t do it now, I’ll never get another chance.

“E-Excuse me!” I called out to Elena, who looked back at me, surprised.

“This is going to sound weird, but are you, by any chance... Emily Saionji?” I asked.

The reason why her voice sounded so familiar to me is that she sounded like Emily, the VTuber.

The average person would never have noticed, but I devoted years of my life to voice actresses and VTubers. What’s more, Emily was my current favorite. I’d watched all of her videos several times, so I’d heard that exact voice chatter away for hours and hours. Most other VTubers went for a high-pitched, saccharine voice, but Emily was a bit different. Her voice, while beautiful, had a unique ring to it which made me like her a lot.

Of course, Elena’s voice wasn’t exactly the same as Emily’s, but they could easily be the same person slightly changing their tone for a recording.

The biggest hint, however, was noticing the incoming call from “Up-Load.” That was the largest VTuber-related entertainment company today—the exact company that also happened to manage Emily Saionji.

“Huh?!” Elena yelped in surprise, covering her mouth with her hands.

This reaction can only mean one thing! I was right!

“C-Come with me for a second!”

All of a sudden, Elena grabbed my hand and started running, pulling me after her. She brought me inside the science lab’s storage room and locked the door behind us.

This looks like the premise of an adult manga...

“Please!” she started, nipping my daydream in the bud. “I beg you! Don’t tell anyone!”

That proved it. The girl bowing her head in front of me was the actress behind my favorite VTuber: Emily Saionji.

“Y-You don’t need to beg me at all. I won’t tell a soul.”

“You really mean it? If you told someone, you see, it could ruin everything for me! My contract says that I have to keep it a secret. I was able to hide my identity for so long online that I’d never have thought I’d get found out at school...”

“And what would happen if you broke your contract?” I asked her.

“If I were the one who told you, I’d have to choose between being fined or being fired. I didn’t tell anyone myself in this case, so I’m not sure what would happen to me...” she whimpered, sounding utterly distraught.

“That sure is harsh. But your secret is safe with me! Don’t worry!”

“Then... I have to thank you. But, tell me, how did you find out?”

“I’ve watched every single Emily Saionji video so many times that I recognized your voice in an instant,” I explained, a little too proudly.

“You watch my videos?! M-More than once?!”

“Yeah, they’re the best! I always wondered who Emily really was, but I *never* could have guessed it was someone from my school!” I chattered, as she listened in silence.

“By the way,” I continued, “I heard that you’re half-English, is that true? That’d explain why Emily can speak English so well! Oh, and congratulations on reaching three hundred *thousand* followers! That’s incredible for a channel that new! Emily’s design is cute, of course, but more than anything, I really like listening to you!”

Words continued to flow out of my mouth without a pause. It was too difficult to contain myself when I was actually getting to speak (in a sense) to the character I loved.

Elena was staring at the floor, covering her mouth with her hand.

Oh no. Did I say too much? Am I being creepy? We don't even know each other at all and I got carried away with my otaku talk...

"Th-Thank you," she said at last.

Surprised, I took a better look at her face, noticing that she'd turned a new shade of scarlet.

Is she blushing because of what I said?

"I... I don't think I've seen you before, so you're probably in another year, right?" she asked me.

"That's right! I'm a second year. I'm Ichigaya, by the way. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Elena. Elena Minami-Williams, from class 1-B. It's a pleasure," she replied.

Finally getting to know Emily was like all my dreams had come true at once. It certainly felt like a dream.

"You see, the company lets me choose my content freely enough, so I always get to talk about stuff that I like in my videos. Some viewers like it, but some are a bit put off by how into it I get. This is my first time hearing a viewer praise my videos in person, and... it makes me happy. I'm sorry I got so worked up. I wasn't trying to accuse you or anything," she said, avoiding my eye.

Hearing her say that, in turn, made me happy too. *To think that anything that I said could make someone like Emily happy...*

"Don't worry about haters! You're bound to get a few when you're so famous. Wait, you said that you can choose what to do in the videos yourself, right? So they don't give you a script?" I asked.

"They give me a general outline, but the words are all mine," she said.

"So does that mean that you really... like y-yuri?" I asked, my curiosity winning over my best judgment.

She paused, still blushing, looking unsure how to respond. "It's weird, isn't it? I mean, for a girl to like yuri. I don't talk about it with my friends, of course,

since none of them are otaku. If they found out about that, or even that I'm a VTuber, they'd probably be pretty disgusted with me..."

Just like Kokoro, Elena was attractive enough to steal any guy's heart. Based on looks alone, there's no way anyone could tell that she was an otaku.



“There’s nothing weird about it! Lots of girls are into yur—” I started saying, but a voice from outside the room interrupted me.

“Ichigaya, are you in there?! I can hear you, you know! Why’d you run off like that?!”

It was Kokoro, shouting as usual as she hammered at the door.

I’d completely forgotten about her!

“S-Sorry, Minami! Do you mind if I open the door?”

“Go ahead...”

With Elena’s permission, I unlocked the door and let Kokoro in.

“There you are!” she said, angry. “What were you doing in here?”

However, as soon as she saw Elena standing next to me, her anger gave way to confusion.

“W-Wait, why are you...? *What?! What are you two doing in here?!* ” she asked, bewildered, as her eyes moved back and forth between Elena’s face and mine.

“We were just talking—” I began.

“Just talking?! Locked in *here?!* ”

“That really is all we were doing,” Elena said, but our explanations, unsurprisingly, didn’t have any effect on Kokoro, who was coming up with her own conclusions.

“Oh, I get it now! You locked the door because you were talking about otaku stuff!”

“What?” Elena and I asked in unison.

“I-I might have overheard that Minami likes yuri... I’m sorry! It totally wasn’t on purpose!” Kokoro stammered.

“Is that what you heard...?” Elena asked her, visibly preoccupied. She was probably scared that her secret VTuber identity may have been discovered by yet another person at school.

“Yeah, that’s all though, I swear!” Kokoro replied.

“I see... I’d better come clean then. Yes, that’s why we had to lock the door. No one knows I’m an otaku, you see, so I wanted to talk a bit more privately...”

It was a lie, but Elena obviously wanted as few people as possible to know about her VTuber career.

“But Ichigaya said he’d never seen you before,” Kokoro said, sounding suspicious, so I played along with Elena’s story.

“W-Well, I desperately had to go to the toilet, but I overheard Minami talking about otaku stuff on the phone...”

“Huh?”

“Y-Yes, that’s what happened! He heard me talking with the entertainment company I work for. I’m actually a voice actress, so—”

“No way! A voice actress?! Do you, like, do anime?!” the easily excited Kokoro questioned.

So that thing about VTubers often being budding voice actors was true, and Elena was one of those voice actors.

“I only voice extras and stuff, since I’m a newbie in the industry. It’ll probably be a long time before I get any major roles.”

“That’s still awesome!” Kokoro squealed with starry eyes.

“If possible, I’d like to ask you to keep our conversation a secret. The fact that I’m an otaku and that I work as a voice actress. Nobody at school, not even my friends, knows exactly what I do. I only tell them that I work for an entertainment company...”

“Of course! *That* Minami, an otaku, huh? Who’d have thought? And don’t worry, we’re in the same boat! I’m secretly an otaku too! So I’d never tell anyone, I swear!”

“R-Really? Thank you so much!” Elena said, as if Kokoro’s words had lifted a weight from her shoulders.

Did Nishina just come out as an otaku to comfort her? I guess she can be kind

when she wants. On the other hand, I've lied about why we're in here... but if it's to protect the secret of Emily Saionji, it's worth it.

"You had me super shocked for a minute when I saw you two in here, but this explains everything! Anyway, now we know about each other's secret hobbies, there's nothing to worry about!"

"Of course, it's such a relief. Oh, I forgot! My friend is waiting for me in the cafeteria!"

We all walked back, but Elena's friend was nowhere to be seen.

"Hm? Oh, she actually texted me. She said she left because she had to go to her part-time job..."

"In that case, want to hang out with us a little bit? You're the first girl I get to chat with IRL about otaku stuff, and I'm sooo hyped about it!"

"I'd love to, certainly! I've never been able to talk about my hobbies in person either," Elena replied.

Since nobody else was in the cafeteria, we sat together and started talking about all things otaku. The topic that the two girls seemed particularly fond of was *IMS*.

"I must say, Nishina, I was pretty surprised to find out that you're an otaku too," Elena said.

"Oh? You mean you knew about me already?"

"Of course! Everyone at school does. But I'd imagined you were the complete opposite of an otaku."

"Eheh..." Kokoro laughed awkwardly.

"So, the two of you," Elena asked, looking at us, "are otaku friends? It must be so nice to have someone in the same year who shares your hobbies."

"W-We just kind of ran into each other outside of school, and now we're, like, helping each other," Kokoro said. I was pretty sure that such a vague explanation would only cause Elena to ask more questions.

"Helping each other... do what?" Elena asked, as I'd expected.

“We can tell her, right?” Kokoro said in my direction, and I nodded in response.

There’s no real reason to hide it from Minami—we already know a secret of hers.

“You see,” Kokoro started explaining, properly this time, “we’re trying to find otaku dates, you know? He’s helping me find an otaku boyfriend, and I’m helping him get an otaku girlfriend. Neither of us are gonna be able to find anyone at school, so we tried other stuff... but, to be totally honest, we kind of suck at it so far.”

“Oh, I see now.”

“By the way, Minami, do you have a boyfriend?” Kokoro asked.

“I-I... I don’t.”

“What?! But someone like you could get any guy they wanted in the world!”

“I’m not really interested in dating... and the contract I signed with my company doesn’t allow me to date either...”

“So that’s a real thing?!” Kokoro shouted, surprised. “I guess it makes sense though... When a voice actor starts dating someone, fans get all mad about it online... I guess people in your industry have to be super careful about love scandals and stuff—more careful than movie actors even!”

For what it was worth, I, the number one fan of Emily Saionji, was very happy that Emily didn’t have a boyfriend and wasn’t planning on finding one any time soon.

“But isn’t the same true for you? You could get a boyfriend so easily!” Elena asked Kokoro.

“I want an *otaku* boyfriend, you see. But it’s not that easy, since I keep it a secret in school. Say, you wouldn’t know how I could, like, find one, would you?”

“Why are you asking Minami this?!” I demanded to know, offended by the very idea, but Elena seemed to be seriously pondering the question.

“I’m not sure it would work in this situation, but a friend of mine said that she

found her boyfriend on a dating app,” she replied.

“A dating app?!” Kokoro and I, who weren’t very familiar with the concept, exclaimed with excitement.

“The one my friend used, more than for romance, is meant for people who are looking for friends. That’s why you can use it even if you’re underage. I don’t use it myself, but I hear that it’s very popular with high schoolers. And you can set it up so that you can find people with the same hobbies as you. That’s what my friend did, since she wanted a boyfriend who shared her love for music. I can’t quite remember the name of the app though...”

“That sounds super interesting,” Kokoro said, clearly already sold on the idea.

Isn’t that a scam? There are probably going to be a lot of fake profiles, or maybe you have to pay to create an account... I thought, but admittedly, the idea of a method of searching for girls with the same interests as me was also really appealing. *Maybe I’d finally be able to find an otaku girlfriend...*

The bell ringing throughout the cafeteria announced that the school was about to be locked up, so we had to leave.

“Wait! You use LINE, right? We should totally add each other!” Kokoro said to Elena.

“Oh, of course! I’d love to!” she replied, and displayed her account QR code on her phone.

I looked on, green with envy, as Kokoro used her own phone to read the code and add Elena as a contact. *I want to add Emily too!*

“Ichigaya,” Elena then said, “if it’s okay with you... would you like to give me your contact too?”

“Wha—?!” I blurted out. As soon as I regained control, I answered her. “O-Of course!” I pulled out my phone with shaking hands, finding my own QR code, and added *Emily Saionji* as a friend.

I just became LINE friends with Emily! I can’t believe it! Why would she even ask me? Is it to avoid offending me? What does it even matter?! I’m so happy!

We split up at the subway station where Elena caught the train that would

take her home.

Kokoro and I went to the supermarket for some groceries before walking home. While my housemate cooked dinner, I took out my phone to check my games, but then I remembered something.

That app that Minami was talking about...

If I used an app like that to look for matches who shared my interests, maybe I could make friends with an otaku girl.

I typed “dating app” into the app store’s search bar, and an overwhelming amount of alternatives appeared on my screen. Based on what Elena had said, I had three hints to find the right one: it was originally meant for people who wanted to make friends, you could use it even if you were underage, and you could search for people with similar interests.

The top results were all dating or marriage-related, so I scrolled past them. I looked carefully through many of the promising ones, but the store descriptions all said that you had to be eighteen or older to use them. Until...

“Friendz: Find Friends and Have Fun!”

I opened the store page for this *Friendz* app and, sure enough, it was what I’d been searching for. The description said that it was *recommended* to users over eighteen, but you could still use it if you were younger. I kept reading and found out that Friendz had “communities,” theme-specific forums, that you could join.

There has to be a community full of otaku girls just waiting to befriend me... maybe... Well, only one way to find out, I thought, and I downloaded it.

When the download was over, I opened the app, and was greeted by a tutorial explaining how to use it. If I found the profile of a girl I wanted to talk with, I could send her a “like,” and then she’d get to choose whether or not to like me back. If she did, we’d have a match. Vice versa, if I got a like from a girl, I could check out her profile and decide whether to return it. In both cases, once we were matched, we would be able to chat with each other.

Since all communication happened within the app, it sounded safer than giving someone my LINE details.

“I found that app that Minami was talking about,” I told Kokoro, who was busy stewing something in the kitchen.

“For real?!” she asked. “Do you think it’s safe? Can you really find otaku there? You try it out first and tell me how it goes!”

“All right...” I said. At first I was annoyed by the way she said it— as if I was supposed to taste her food for poison before she ate it too. But after all, it was safer for a boy. The worst that could happen to me was finding out that someone was catfishing me.

After the tutorial, the app prompted me to enter the required information to create my account.

“How is it?! Found any dates yet?!” Kokoro jumped at me as soon as she was done cooking.

She looked at my phone, her bright eyes sparkling with expectation.

“I haven’t even finished setting it up yet... I’ll create my account after dinner,” I said.

“Perfect!” she replied, and set dinner on the table.

She’d made pork curry today, which was up to her usual cooking standards.

“This is so good!” I said after taking a single bite.

“I-It’s nothing I can brag about. The roux is store-bought...” she said, failing to hide a smile. Even small compliments toward her culinary skills seemed to boost her mood.

When was the last time I ate homemade curry? I never go through the trouble of cooking it, so I’ve only had restaurant and convenience store curry for so long. But this! This is full of meat, potatoes, and carrots, and everything is so nice and flavorful. It even tastes healthier! Mom had a point when she said that it’s better to cook at home.

I demolished it, barely chewing. After finishing my serving, getting seconds, and finishing those too, it was time to check out *Friendz*.

I pulled out my phone as Kokoro sat next to me on the couch.

Isn't she even a little bit concerned about sitting so close to a guy? Am I still not even a boy to her? I thought as my gaze, against my will, slowly drifted toward her chest, where her low-necked pajamas were very close to uncovering her bra. As if the visual stimulation wasn't uncomfortable enough, she also smelled dizzyingly sweet.

She hasn't even bathed yet. Is it her perfume or something? How am I supposed to act natural with all of this?!

"What are you waiting for? Sign up already!" she urged me, seeing that I wasn't moving.

"What? Ah, yes, the app..."

Seems like she doesn't see me as a guy at all, huh.

"The first thing I need is... a profile picture? No way I'm uploading a picture of my face!"

Letting strangers on the internet see my face sounded unsafe as hell, but the main reason I didn't want to do it was pretty obvious—a mug like mine would discourage any girl from speaking to me, never mind my otaku dream girl.

"Yeah, me neither. I don't want my friends to find out that I'm using a *dating app*, let alone one to look for an otaku guy," she said, so we both agreed not to show our faces in our profile pictures.

The next step was entering my name, but people visiting my profile would only be able to see my initials.

"I've added my birthday, my blood type, my address, and now... hobbies. Let's see: gacha games, VTubers, anime, manga, internet, and...doujinshi, I guess," I said.

"Are you serious?!" Kokoro stopped me. "You're really going to put that your hobbies are nothing but otaku stuff?!"

"I'm looking for an otaku girlfriend, so why wouldn't I?"

"Ugh, you're so dumb. When a girl says she wants an otaku boyfriend, she doesn't mean that she's looking for Otaku McOtakinson, with his moe t-shirts and body pillow waifu! What she wants is a guy who has those interests but has

enough self-awareness to be able to at least pretend to be a fine, well-adjusted human being! On an otaku scale, from one to ten, you should be aiming for a six or seven! Not eleven! And *doujinshi*?! Are you out of your mind?! Any sane girl would run away from you! But even without that, a guy that only mentions otaku stuff as if it's a personality trait just sounds like he has issues! Don't you have any... cooler hobby? Anything will do!"

"But this stuff is really all I'm passionate about..."

"Jeez! It doesn't matter if you're not full-on *passionate*! Even stuff you do occasionally is fine! Even stuff you just did once! Who cares!"

"Cooler" hobbies? Hm, it was fun taking Nishina's cosplay pictures the other day. Maybe... photography? The only camera I have is on my phone, but oh well. Guys who are into photography are cool. Maybe I'll even meet a cosplayer who wants me to take her pictures! What else...? I guess, sometimes, I ride my bicycle all the way to Akihabara to save the train fare. Cycling is a cool hobby too, right?

In the end, I listed anime, games, photography, and cycling. It certainly looked like the profile of an extroverted, well-adjusted otaku.

Kokoro also downloaded the app, skipping through the tutorial faster than she could read it.

"What are you going to write down as hobbies?" I asked her.

"I'm doing it now, don't rush me! I have games, anime, BL, male voice actors, cosplaying, shopping, cooking..."

"Whoa there! What happened to presenting yourself as a 'fine, well-adjusted human being'? How's BL any better than *doujinshi*?!"

"I know it sounds bad, but... being a *fujoshi* is part of my identity! Like, I can't date someone who isn't gonna accept that!"

Huh? What kind of identity is that?

"Sure, yeah, but is that really the first impression you want to give? Guys are going to think you're the type of girl who'll force her hobbies down their throats! Wouldn't it just be better to tell them that you like BL *after* you've

become friends? And honestly, ‘male voice actors’ doesn’t look good either... I mean, if you’re looking for a boyfriend, you can’t just go and say that you’re crazy for this or that other guy,” I said.

“R-Really? Ugh... Fine! I’ll delete those...” she said, reluctantly following my advice.

“Now the profile description...”

I’ve got no idea what I should write... But I definitely need to make it clear that I’m looking for an otaku girlfriend.

We both started typing in silence.

“I’m done!” shouted Kokoro after a while.

“Show me!”

17yo @FujimiCity. NS *TouRabu* HypMic *D.Donan* Ai5 / IMS. My DMs are open!

“Were you trying to write a Twitter bio or something?! Nobody’s going to contact you like that! The average person can’t even decipher what half of that means!” I said.

“I know! It’s on purpose! It’s like a hidden otaku message. Only guys who get what it means will message me!”

“I get what it means, but that’s just because I’m a huge otaku. The average otaku boy doesn’t know the first thing about girls’ series! To them a profile like that is just intimidating! Can’t you add something more normal? And also... why the hell did you write down the name of the station next to my house?! Is this your first time using the internet?!”

“You think it’s dangerous to do that?” she asked.

“Of course it is!”

“Okay then... But, when you say to write something more normal, what do you even mean? Give me an example!”

“I just mean something that a guy would want to respond to. Like...” I coughed and put on my best girl voice. *“Hi! I’m new to this app! Heart emoji. I*

signed up because I want to meet people who share my hobbies! Heart emoji.
Let's become friends and watch anime and play games together! Heart emoji...
That's the general idea."

"Hm, I think I see what you mean... But let me see what you wrote first!" she said, pulling my phone toward her.

I am an otaku boy currently in high school. It would be a pleasure to become friends with otaku girls. In particular, girls who like IMS, FG0, or VTubers would be ideal, but I have no problem with girl stuff too. If you're not familiar with the otaku world, I'd be happy to teach you a thing or two. Then maybe, if you'd like, we could watch anime together. Thanks for your time.

"Creeeeepy!" Kokoro screeched.

"Huh?!" I said, shocked. "What's so creepy?! I tried to be as gentlemanly as I could!"

"You sound like an old man... and if you're going to talk about shoving hobbies down someone's throat, you should sort out your own profile first! *I'd be happy to teach you a thing or two?* What about learning about what they like?"

"B-But that's not what I—"

"Also, this is an app for making friends, but you're only creeping on girls! Tone it down a notch and make it say, like, *I don't know a lot about girl stuff, but I'd like to learn more*, or something!" she said.

Her words hit me hard enough to halve my health.

"And don't forget to make it sound like you're not just some otaku dweeb—you're a cool guy who also likes otaku stuff, got it?"

"Tsk. Fine, I get it. I'll rewrite it," I said.

"What's with that attitude? I'm trying to help you here! Like, if you posted *that* there's no way you'd get a single match!"

"As if yours was so much better! It'd take a miracle for anyone to match with

you! You should be thankful for my advice!”

“*Huh?! Like, you think I need your advice! I can do perfectly fine on my own. You know what? That’s totally what I’ll do. Let’s just both use the app without any advice from each other, since my advice offended your poor self!*”

“G-Good! That’s exactly what I want!”

“Just wait till I find a boyfriend on here!”

“Hah! I’m on the edge of my seat!”

Done shouting at each other, we went to our respective rooms, closing the door firmly behind us.

Maybe she’s right, but can’t she just say it in a less annoying way? Anyone would get mad hearing that! Hmph. Who needs her anyway? I’m going to do it all by myself! But still, she is an otaku girl, so I’d better take a little bit of what she said into account.

I want to become friends with other otaku. On my days off I like to watch anime, play games, cycle with my friends, and take photos. My main interests right now are IMS, FG0, and VTubers, but I’m also curious about girl stuff, so I hope you can teach me more!

After rewriting my profile description with Kokoro’s advice in mind, I reread it and nodded to myself with satisfaction. *Perfect!*

I then went back to the app’s home screen and began my hunt through girls’ profiles.

I’m a university student from Tokyo! My hobbies are going to concerts and snowboarding. Take a look at my communities, and if you think we have similar hobbies, feel free to like my profile! I’d like some friends to drink with, either male or female!

This girl sounded like the average extroverted university student. Her picture looked kind of cute too, but, with filters that heavy, I couldn’t help but be

suspicious about her true appearance. In any case, she wasn't an otaku, so I wasn't interested. Next.

Hobbies: visual kei, anime, cosplay, etc...

Oh! This girl sounds like an otaku! And she cosplays too! I wonder what she looks like—

"Eek!" I squealed to myself.

Her profile picture was a point-blank selfie, featuring a face that no amount of filters could fix. Not to mention that completely unapologetic visual kei outfit and hairdo. Looking at her was physically painful.

I don't reply to accounts that don't have a profile picture. If you're going to like my profile without messaging me, please don't waste my time. And if you're slow at replying, don't message me in the first place.

Whoa. Just writing "crazy woman looking for crazy man" would have been faster. She's a real piece of work... And she's... thirty?!

Even considering how much of an asshole I was being, I still hoped that no girl would think the same things about me. I got the feeling that, had I posted my profile description without Kokoro's advice, that might have been the case.

I messed around with the app a bit more, before remembering the unique feature of being able to look people up by community.

I started entering keywords like "otaku" and "anime," which immediately brought up loads of related communities. There were some generic ones like "Anime Lovers' Community" or "Otaku Friendz Community," and even more specific ones like "Idol Producer Community" and "VTuber Community." They all seemed to have quite a few members.

There are more otaku than I thought on here...

I opened some of the member lists and started looking through girls. There were plenty to look through, and some were even pretty cute.

Cute otaku girls who love my favorite series?! And there are this many?! I'd thought dating apps were just meant for desperate losers, but if being

desperate gets you this... sign me up. I could never find girls like these in real life.

A week later.

I'd continued using the app and even sent a few likes here and there. However, none of the girls with cute pictures ever liked me back, which meant that I hadn't been able to talk to any of them.

There was too much competition, or something like that. So I compromised and tried looking for girls who didn't have a picture at all, just like me.

I'd come up with a few conditions to screen them: they had to live in Tokyo, be in high school, be an otaku (of course), and be into the same genres as I was. Then I'd read their introduction and judge whether they seemed pleasant or not.

I sent a like to eight girls like this and got three matches. The first quickly ghosted me, and the second, probably because our conversation was really dull, slowly started taking more and more time to respond until she began ignoring me completely.

Basically, there was only one girl left.

I'd found her profile on top of the search results, marked with the word *new*. Her profile said she lived in Tokyo and was in her second year of high school, also like me. She liked *IMS* and was growing to like VTubers, not to mention she was a cosplayer.

The list of hobbies alone was enough to make me excited, but I also liked her profile description: *"I'm looking for friends with the same hobbies as me. If we click, let's watch anime together!"*

Based on what I knew about her, she was the closest a real person could come to being my dream girl. I didn't know what she looked like, but to be a cosplayer she must have been at least *somewhat* cute. My excitement kept growing and growing the more I read about her.

"K"—that was the first initial of her name—also made me smile a lot, and she was really interesting to talk to. Our conversations never seemed to die out.

I really want to meet her... But if I'm not careful she'll think I'm creepy...

That night, before going to sleep, I did my best to come up with a message that made my intentions clear without sounding too aggressive.

"I really enjoy our chats, K! Wouldn't it be fun to meet sometime?"

She replied after a few minutes. *"Yes! That'd be fun!"*

For real now?! She's okay with it?!

"I heard that they're going to put on an IMS event at a café in Akihabara. Would you like to go there together?"

Since *IMS* was one of our main topics of discussion, I thought she'd like the idea.

K, who usually replied immediately to my messages, remained silent for enough time for me to get scared.

Here we go... I creeped her out! I have to take that back! But how?! We were getting along so well, and I ruined it! My heart was crying with distress when I got a notification on my phone.

"I would! Actually, I wanted to go there to begin with."

"YEAH!" My shout of joy echoed in my room.

Friendz is awesome! I'm going to meet a girl! At this rate, I'm gonna find a date before Nishina does!

The next day.

"Morning."

"...Mornin'."

Kokoro and I had kept conversation to a minimum lately, barely greeting each other and only speaking when it was absolutely necessary. I was still slightly annoyed with her, and the feeling was probably mutual.

"You still using that app?" I asked her. I had no idea if she'd made any progress in the last week.

“I am, now you mention it, and it’s been going pretty great for me!” she proudly replied.

“I see...” I said, slightly nervous.

“B-By the way,” she started asking me, not looking particularly proud anymore, “you’re not, like, free on Saturday, are you?”

“Not really. Why?” I said. It was the day I was supposed to meet K.

“Oh, well... Never mind then.”

“Come on, spit it out.”

“I said never mind! I’m going out now!” she said as she left, back to being mad at me.

I groaned to myself. *Why is she mad this time?*

A few days passed, and it was Saturday—time for my date with K. We’d agreed to meet at 1 p.m. at Akihabara Station.

I woke up at around ten, and Kokoro had already left the house. Even if she was an otaku, she had lots of friends so, unlike me, she went out most weekends.

When I was starting to get ready to leave, I checked my phone.

“What?!”

“*I’m very sorry! I can’t come today!*” K had messaged me around two hours ago.

B-But why?! What happened? I thought, continuing to read another message that she’d sent just before I woke up.

“*Forget about it, I’m so sorry for canceling on you like that! I think I’ll be able to come after all! Sorry!*”

What’s going on?

“*Sorry for replying so late. Is everything all right?*” I wrote to her.

“*Yes, don’t worry!*” K replied instantly.

I still wondered what kind of problem she could have had at 8 a.m. on a Saturday, but I had to hurry up and get dressed if I didn't want to be late.

I tried to find something in my closet that looked better than the “weird rock band t-shirt” I wore when I attended the otaku party, since Kokoro had roasted my entire outfit. I settled for a black and red checkered shirt and a pair of less “cheap-looking” jeans.

To be honest, I'd wanted to buy something new for my first date, but I had no idea what to look for or even where to look for it. I could have asked Kokoro for help, maybe, but lately she'd been acting all weird. She kept starting to say things, then would just halt mid-sentence, telling me to never mind—over and over again.

And since I couldn't count on *her* help, I had to do my best to dress up nicely on my own. I'd even tried putting on hair wax, but no matter how long I stood in front of the mirror, moving my hair this and that way, I couldn't make it look particularly good. It was a bit too late to wash it out now.

I left home just in time to reach Akihabara station ten minutes before I was supposed to meet K. As I rode the train to get there, my stomach started to ache from all the nerves.

Will I really be able to talk to a girl I've just met for the first time? I thought. I was starting to regret that I hadn't asked Kokoro for hints on how to dress for a date or how to behave during one. Had I just done that, maybe I wouldn't have been so nervous.

Right before reaching Akihabara, I sent K a message.

“Almost there! I'll wait for you next to the Electric Town exit!”

“Okay. Actually I'm already at the station, so I'll go over there.”

Maybe I should have left earlier...

Once I got off the train, I quickly headed toward the Electric Town exit.

She's probably there already... Now that I think of it, how am I even supposed to find her? I've never even seen her face. Maybe I should have told her what I

look like or something.

Trying not to get in anyone's way, I began to move next to a pillar to message K, but someone was already standing there.

"What?!" I accidentally said aloud, noticing Kokoro's familiar figure. Taking a moment to compose myself, I considered saying hello, but I hesitated as I took a better look at her.

She looked dreadfully pale as she held onto her phone, her hands shaking.

What's wrong with her? Is she feeling sick?

"Nishina?" I called out to her.

She yelped in surprise when she saw me.

"I-Ichigaya?! What are you doing here?!"

"Never mind me—what are *you* doing here?!"

"I-I'm supposed to see someone I met on Friendz. But, like, now that I'm here, I'm so nervous that I thought maybe I should tell him I'm sorry and leave," she said, her voice trembling.

"Actually... I'm here to see someone I met on Friendz too. We're supposed to go to that *IMS* event together..."

"What...? WHAT?! You're K?!" she asked me.

I froze in place for a second. "Y-You don't mean... You're K too?!"

On Friendz, I'd only been able to see her first initial—and she'd only been able to see mine. *K... Kokoro? No, it can't be...*

"Your first name is... Kagetora. It's you, isn't it?!"

Both of us were shocked out of our minds.



“Now that I think about it, it totally makes sense... K likes *IMS* and VTubers, just like you... and his profile says that he wants to learn more about otaku girl stuff! That’s what I told you to put! You complained so much, but you even took my advice?!” Kokoro said, as I realized my own K also perfectly fit Kokoro.

No wonder I liked that profile...

“You also rewrote your profile like I told you to, didn’t you?! After you said you didn’t want any of my advice!”

“When I first liked that profile,” I said, “it said that it was new... Was that because we started using the app on the same day?”

“That’d make sense...” she said. We sighed, looking at each other awkwardly.

“Ugh, gag me with a spoon! Do you have any idea how much time I wasted on *you* this past week?! All that effort for nothing!” Kokoro lamented in desperation.

“That’s my line! I wrote every single message being as careful as could be! My stomach hurt from all the nerves all the way here!” I replied, but Kokoro was not giving up.

“Anyway, what’s that outfit?” she demanded to know. “You dressed like *that* for a date?! You better hope your *dream girl* brought you a gold medal for being the biggest, geekiest dork there is! Even if you *did* manage to get a date with a real girl, she’d totally run away the second she saw you!”

“Wh-What?!” I said, shocked and depressed that I was still having insults hurled at me for an outfit that I’d thought would pass.

Kokoro sighed. “Well, I’m kind of relieved, to be totally honest,” she said, as a smile played across her lips.

“What do you mean?”

“Meeting a guy I don’t know is super scary, you know? I even tried to ask you to come along with me, just in case... I was so freaked out that I considered standing him up last minute, which would have been the worst thing I could do!”

I finally understood the message I’d got this morning and the thing that

Kokoro had tried to ask me the other day. But I couldn't be mad at her for trying to stand me up—I could see where she was coming from. Up until now, I'd been nervous as hell, but it was probably a thousand times worse for a girl. Kokoro wasn't even used to speaking with guys.

"But why didn't you just say you couldn't go when I invited you? I mean, it was only me, so it turned out fine in the end, but what if it'd been some dangerous stranger?" I asked her.

"I'm trying to find a boyfriend, *duh*. What's the point if I refuse to meet anyone?"

"Hm, you have a point. But your parents kind of gave me the responsibility to look after you, so try not to do anything too dangerous, okay?"

"Huh?! Wh-What's that supposed to mean...?" she stammered, hiding her blushing cheeks by turning to walk away from the station.

"Where are you going?"

"I came all the way to Akihabara for this! So I'm going to that café!"

"Oh, sure..."

"You can go back home if you want, but if you *really* want to tag along, feel free," she said.

"I was planning to go there anyway!"

I'd come all the way to Akihabara for this *IMS* event. It would have been a waste to go back home now.

We entered the café and were immediately surrounded by *IMS*. The walls were literally covered in illustrations.

"Look at thaaat! Ah! And all the drinks and desserts have names of girls from the gaaame! It's so cuuute!"

Each item on the café's menu shared a name with one of the main *IMS* idols. Kokoro and I each ordered a dessert based on our favorite girl.

I was having so much fun that I entirely forgot about the whole "K"

embarrassment.

Before going home, we took a bunch of pictures of the place, finished our desserts, bought some merchandise, and had more fun at the event than we ever could have had with a total stranger.

6

The following day, Sunday.

I was lying down on the couch in the living room, melancholically sighing to myself as I considered the previous day's events.

In the end, I'd had fun during my trip to Akihabara, but now it felt like I'd wasted a lot of effort just to be back at square one. To be honest with myself, my expectations had probably been too high. I'd thought K would be the one—my dream girl—and that I could end up dating her without a hitch.

So much for that.

I didn't even feel like using Friendz anymore. The only girl I'd managed to chat with ended up being Kokoro, so I'd have to go through the whole process of looking at profiles and sending likes all over again.

But if I don't use the app, will I be able to find a girl at all?

The door opened and Kokoro came in.

"Hi!"

"Welcome back," I said, looking at her and the mountain of shopping bags she was holding.

"I went on a total spree! So, you know, can't afford any more luxuries this month!" she said, looking entirely satisfied with the fact.

Her parents periodically wired her money to pay for food, tuition, and other necessities, plus an allowance which, based on how much she was carrying, must have been pretty hefty. Since I had to cut back on my living expenses to finance my hobbies, I couldn't help but be envious when she'd said she was going out shopping with her friends.

"This is just so cute! It's like it was made for me!" she yammered as she pressed this and that piece of clothing up against her body in front of the living room mirror.

“Can’t you do that somewhere else?” I asked.

“This is the only full-length mirror in the house!”

“I know, but...”

She hoisted more clothes out of the shopping bags and continued her one-woman fashion show.

“Your outfits aren’t very otaku-friendly, you know?” I commented. I’d actually felt that way for a while.

“Wh-What?!” she replied as, in her hands, she held a black sleeveless top and a red checkered miniskirt. They could have been fashionable choices from a girl’s perspective, but, for an otaku guy, wearing something flashy like that was like labeling yourself as an unapproachable, slutty gyaru.

Every single item of clothing she’d spread across the living room floor fit that exact stereotype, with all the stark blacks, reds and those tight, revealing cuts. Easy-girl clothing, you might say.

She’d spared no effort in insulting my own outfit on the previous day, but, if she really wanted to find an otaku boyfriend, I wasn’t the only one who had terrible taste.

“Says *who*?! You wanna take a good look in the mirror and see whose clothes are uglier?! Actually, with you, the problem goes much deeper than that outfit!” she scoffed, her voice rising with her temper.

It was just an innocuous comment... Why is she always so mad at me?

“Don’t stress yourself. Let me guess what you’re going to say,” I retorted. “My *deeper problem* is my face, isn’t it? No amount of effort could make th—”

“No! Why are you like this?! See? This is why you can’t have nice things! What you just said! The way you think! The way you write everything off as useless before even trying!”

“H-Huh? If it’s not my face, what is it then?”

“Cleanliness! Your problem is that you lack the most important thing: cleanliness!” she barked, angrily pointing a perfectly manicured nail at me.

C-Cleanliness?

“I mean, you live here, right? You know that I take baths every day—”

“That’s not what I’m talking about! Like, you can wash but still look gross, and the other way around! Now, listen, what I’m going to say is super *duper* important, so just try and remember it, okay? Do you even know what the most important things are when it comes to making a good impression? The first is cleanliness. The second is also cleanliness. Now the third, and this may surprise you, is, of course, cleanliness!”

“Cleanliness...” I parroted her as the word bounced around inside my skull.

“Your hair sticks up at every angle! Your eyebrows are fuzzy and weird! Your fingernails are too long! You look super gross! And the lack of sleep from your late-night porn marathons has made your skin all dry and crusty!”

“A-Are those things really that important?” I asked her.

“Are you kidding me?! They’re a thousand times more important than being handsome! And you *can* do something about looking clean! If you look that filthy and it puts off girls, you have no one to blame but yourself and your own laziness!”

“Okay, okay! I get your point, but... more important than being handsome? You can’t be serious?” I objected.

“It is! It really is! Ask any girl out there and she’ll totally say the same thing!”

But... this means that I could actually become more attractive if I cleaned up some more!

“Go on then, what should I do?” I asked her.

“Hm... I guess you’ll need to get this stuff down, otherwise when you actually meet a girl you won’t stand a chance with her. Fine. I’ll teach you. I did promise, after all. I’m going to tell you all the important things, one by one, so you better be grateful and take notes!”

“O-Okay!” I said, half annoyed by how patronizing she was and half desperate to hear the information. I pulled out my phone, ready to take notes as she’d commanded.

“First things first: I told you that you can look dirty even if you’re clean, but you can’t look clean at all if you *are* dirty. So you should probably take your baths in the morning so that you can leave the house all nice and fresh. People get all sweaty in their sleep, you know?”

Ugh, I have to wake up earlier? Well, maybe I’ll just do it when I have a date, I thought, despite not having the slightest idea when and if that was even going to happen.

“Next,” Kokoro said, “is that skin of yours. Even if you’re a man, having glowing skin makes you look clean and waaay more attractive. You have to moisturize after every single time you wash your face, and you should just fix up that lifestyle in general. Get some actual sleep and eat better! And if your skin still looks so bad after all that, go to a dermatologist! It’s covered by insurance and everything, so you can get really effective creams super cheap. I go to mine every time I get pimples!” she went on.

“You go to a... pimple doctor?”

“If I can have totally flawless skin, quickly and cheaply, why wouldn’t I?”

If I was going to concentrate on improving my oh-so-unhealthy lifestyle, I’d have to make room between my otaku responsibilities for Kokoro’s nightly skincare routine—that also meant going to the drugstore and buying some moisturizer.

“Now,” she said, “you should pluck your eyebrows and trim your nose hair on a regular basis! Have you even trimmed them, like, ever?”

“I...” *have not.*

“You *haven’t*?! Like, seriously?! You can even get special scissors for that kind of thing, so go and buy some! And you’re also gonna need tweezers to clean up the shape of your eyebrows. For a face-shape like yours...” she trailed off, looking up something on her phone before showing it to me. It was a close-up picture of a handsome actor.

“I’ll send it to you later, so try to pluck your brows like him. That should suit your face,” she explained.

“Wow, you really know your stuff...”

“These are just the basics, so even you should be able to do this much by yourself eventually! Next, your hair! You always go to a barber, right?”

“Yeah...”

“And you never style it?”

“Yeah...”

“That’s no good at all! Go to a proper salon! I’ll even give you the address of the one I usually go to. It’s a bit pricey, but it’s totally worth it! Just tell them that you want it shorter and cleaned up a bit, and they’ll fix you up for sure! And you need to actually make the effort to style it yourself every day!”

She continued bombarding me with information as I diligently typed it all out on my phone.

“If you want a super hot hairstyle, it’s all about how you dry your hair after washing it. When you get good at it, you can do fancy things like folding your bangs to one side or ruffling them up, but for now just make sure you actually use a blow dryer. But, like, be gentle and go with the grain, not against it. And when you’re done—hair wax! Now, come with me!” she said, standing up and walking toward the bathroom with me right on her heels.

“It’d actually be better to do this right after you’ve dried it, but I’ll just go ahead like this... What are you waiting for? Bend down! I can’t reach!” she whined.

“Okay?” I asked, confused.

“Like, first you need to use a hard wax to create some volume...”

Kokoro made me crouch a little in front of the mirror and stood behind me. I wasn’t expecting her to actually mess with my hair at all, so feeling her warm hands on my head took me by surprise.

I-Is she fine with touching me like this? I thought, desperately trying to hide my nervousness since she could see my face in the mirror.

“H-How do you know how to do men’s hair?” I asked her.

“I do my own hair every day, so it’s kinda the same—just shorter.”

“You sure about that?”

“Stop yapping and look at what I’m doing!”

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

I was so tense from having a girl’s fingers run through my hair that I’d forgotten the whole point of this operation. I had to snap out of it and try my best to concentrate on learning how to look “clean.”

“When you’re done, you need to, like, use a softer wax to fix the tips.”

“I see,” I said, watching her hands as I added to my notes.

“See, even that ugly haircut can look decent if you bother styling it right. Look!” she said, pointing at my reflection.

“I... Whoa! It’s like what popular guys have!” I said, genuinely in awe of my new look. I couldn’t believe that something as simple as changing my hair could change my whole appearance so much.

“Practice until you can do it by yourself, got it?”

“Yeah, I’ll do my best anyway,” I agreed.

“The next step, let’s see... Your breath!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The way your breath smells is super important! Foul breath can ruin the most handsome of men!”

“Then I’d better be more careful...” I mumbled, realizing that I’d never given much thought to it. Imagining a cute girl with smelly breath was enough to convince me of Kokoro’s point.

“So, should I be doing something differently?” I asked.

“You can’t forget to brush your teeth every single morning and evening. That includes your tongue, because that’s where the nastiest bacteria live! If you get cavities or anything like that, go see the dentist right away. *Immediately*. You don’t wanna smell like you have worse problems, like cavities or gum disease.”

“Last time I went to the dentist he didn’t find anything wrong with my teeth, and it’s not like they hurt, so I don’t think I have any cavities,” I said.

“Better be safe than sorry when it comes to your breath! There are just sooo many things that can make it smell bad: not keeping your mouth clean enough, having a dry mouth, being on an empty stomach, having problems with digestion... and make sure you always have mints on you when you leave the house!”

I was certain that I was now an expert on bad breath and its causes.

“So I should make sure my mouth doesn’t become dry and always have mints at the ready, right?”

“I guess that should do, yeah. But it’s not like your breath ever troubled me or anything,” she said to my utmost relief.

“In general, though,” she went on, “you have to take care of all kinds of bad smells, not just the ones coming out of your mouth! Like, keep yourself clean, always wear clean clothes, and use an antiperspirant all the time! Since I’m in charge of doing the laundry, stinky clothes shouldn’t be a problem. Mom taught me how to dry clothes so they never smell moldy, and I’m using a super fresh fabric softener...”

Has she really been putting that much care into our laundry?

“It’s summer soon, so you better hurry up and buy an antiperspirant—a men’s one, so you don’t smell all flowery like a girl. Oh, and don’t forget your feet! Guys’ feet can get really gross and sweaty, so keep them clean—your shoes too!”

“Sure, but can I ask you something? You never had a boyfriend, right? Where’d you get all this info on men’s feet?” I asked, surprised by her familiarity with the topic.

“I live with my dad, *duh*. In the summer, he always washes his feet as soon as he comes home,” she explained.

The most surprising part was that her dad, despite his age, still took care of himself really well. I had to admit that he looked pretty cool for a dad, even if he also looked like he might throw me out a window when Kokoro finally breaks up with me. It was hard to believe that he was almost the same age as mine.

Looking at his daughter, I wondered if, maybe, looking naturally good and

putting in the effort to look even better ran in the Nishina family.

“By the way,” I asked her, “what about cologne? I always see tons of fancy bottles at Don Quixote.”

I often shopped at Don Quixote, which had a substantial perfume section.

“Uhm... It *could* work if you managed to choose a good one, but, like, forget about it for now. You don’t wanna buy something weird or cover yourself in it. It’s better not to smell like anything than gas your dream girl with your cologne! If you do eventually go and buy some anyway, please get it at a proper store, not a dollar store.”

At this point, I was entirely convinced by her argument.

“That should totally cover all you need to know for now,” Kokoro said.

I scrolled through all my notes in silence. There were so many.

Being attractive is so hard. I never even thought about most of these things.

I already had to remember a lot of things on a daily basis, and now there was even more stuff that I’d need to do before even trying to meet a girl. Maybe the fact that it was so difficult explained why there were so few truly popular guys. In order to be attractive, no matter how handsome you were to begin with, you still needed to put in a lot of effort.

“So I’ll have to go to a salon, then go to the drugstore and buy moisturizer, tweezers, and scissors, then buy soft and hard hair wax, men’s antiperspirant, and mints. That’s not going to be cheap. Will I even have any gacha money left?” I wondered to myself. My notes had become more of a shopping list.

“Just stick with free gacha pulls for a while!” Kokoro, overhearing me, said. “You want a real girlfriend, don’t you? This is only the *first* step if you want to even think about going down that road! You have to actually put in effort or you’ll just keep sucking at finding one!”

Her words reminded me that, in this harsh world, you often have to sacrifice one thing in order to gain another, and so I made up my mind and went to buy the things I needed as soon as I could.

“And um, by the way...” she said as we walked back into the living room,

where the clothes she'd bought were still spread out across the room, "about my outfits not being otaku-friendly..."

"Yeah, they're the opposite of that," I said.

"But, like, why?! I don't get it!"

Finally! It's my turn to be the patronizing one.

"Look at these," I said smugly. "This is what a gyaru would wear. They make you look slutty, or just outright scary!"

"There's no way they could do that! They're all so cute!" she objected, looking at the clothes she'd piled onto the couch.

"The colors are too strong! All black and red... Boys like lighter, more gentle colors. White, light pink, pastels..."

To be precise, by "boys" I meant "Kagetora Ichigaya," but many others would surely share that opinion.

I pulled out my phone and typed "virgin-killer outfit" into the search bar, showing Kokoro a picture of a frilly white blouse tucked into a high-waisted skirt with a corseted front.

"This is what otaku boys like!"

"I-I see..."

I opened up a page with a whole gallery of virgin-killer outfits sorted by brand. Every single one was cute and feminine—full of frills and lace. This was pretty much any otaku's definition of what the perfect girl should wear.

"Look, these are all nice," I said, showing it to her.

"S-Seriously? Aren't they a bit too... cutesy?"

"That's the point! A cute girl with long black hair and an outfit like this would be cute enough to make any otaku fall in love at first sight!"

"You're hyping this up way too much... but you do sound super convinced," she said as she stared at my phone.

"The thing about long black hair... is that also true?" she asked.

“Two hundred percent,” I immediately replied.

“Uhm... But the girls at school would probably tease me to death if I did my hair like that all of a sudden, and I don’t really like black hair that much.”

“Even if you don’t want to dye your hair, you should at least do something about the way you dress,” I said.

“Ugh! This wouldn’t be so annoying if *anyone* with actual fashion sense gave me this advice,” she lamented, taking my phone in her hands and staring even harder at the screen.

“I can’t afford to go on another shopping spree, at least for a while, but when I get my next allowance I’ll go out and get a few things. I have to figure this out and still try to look cute before I meet any guys.”

“That sounds like a good idea. Oh, right, you should do something about your makeup too. It’s way too... gaudy.”

“Huh?! Gaudy?! I go easy on my makeup!” she protested.

“Compared to a clown, maybe! You’re trying to say those eyelashes are real?!” I questioned, pointing at the ridiculously long spider legs around her eyes. “I must have already mentioned this, but otaku like natural-looking makeup! If even I can tell you’re wearing any, that’s probably already too much!”

“That’s like saying that you need to be so perfect that you look cute without any makeup to begin with!” she said.

Doesn’t she realize that she actually looks cuter without makeup?! Does she have zero self-awareness?! I thought, but saying it out loud would be too embarrassing, so I kept my mouth shut.

“O-Okay, I get it,” she said. “I can’t go to school looking like that, but maybe I could make it work in other situations. I’ll watch some makeup tutorials and look into the... what did you call them? Virgin-killer outfits?”

“Yeah, those are the ones. Oh, by the way, are you still using Friendz?” I asked her.

“Nah, I deleted my account.”

“What? Why?”

“Y-You told me not to do anything too dangerous...” she said, avoiding my gaze.

She really took my words to heart?

“Honestly,” she continued, “I’m fine with, like, chatting, but actually meeting boys IRL is a bit scary.”

“Oh. That makes sense, sure.”

Meeting with strangers was dangerous for anyone, much more so for a young girl like Kokoro. Still, I was surprised yet again by how quickly she’d taken my advice.

* * *

The next day, after school, I stopped by the drugstore under Kokoro’s orders.

When I got back, I found her in the living room, hunched over her laptop.

Why’d she move all of that down here from her bedroom?

“Hi,” I told her as I passed, but I got no reply.

Annoyed, I turned to look at her properly and noticed she had headphones on. *Now, this is a rare sight.*

I moved behind her and looked down at the screen. She was playing a game I’d never seen before.

“What are you doing there?” I asked her.

“Eek! Don’t scare me like that!” Kokoro cried, ripping off her headphones and spinning to face me.

“I said hi, but you didn’t reply. Why are you all set up in the living room?”

“The Wi-Fi is too laggy upstairs,” she explained.

“You’re playing online?” I asked, taking a second glance at the screen.

The router was in the living room, so it probably made sense to come downstairs to play. Personally, I didn’t know much about PC games. I’d played a few back in middle school but never really got into them. As for Kokoro, she

definitely didn't look like the type to play anything except for the occasional gacha game, so that had me surprised.

"So... you're also a gamer girl, huh?"

"Not really. This is my first time. The controls are super hard. Are you good at this kind of thing?" she asked me.

Her character looked like she'd heavily decorated it with accessories and all kinds of shiny enhancements, but she was rolling around so awkwardly that even I, who knew nothing about this game, could tell that she was a beginner.

"Why'd you even start this game?"

"Now that I don't use Friendz anymore, I figured I needed a new place to look for guys. I asked one of my Twitter friends where she'd met hers, and she told me they met while playing an MMO," Kokoro explained.

"And of course, you lost no time..." I said. I imagined that from the perspective of someone who genuinely wanted to have fun playing the game, someone like this, who joined the game to use it as a dating website, would be a complete nuisance. Thou shalt not game with impure intentions.

"I mean, her story was sooo incredible! This guy was always helping her in the game, looking out for her, right? And then one day they met IRL and fell in love with each other, just like that! Isn't that the most romantic thing ever?!" Kokoro swooned.

"I guess so..." I said, but that story was fundamentally different from what Kokoro was doing. Her friend had been playing for fun and just happened to find a boyfriend. I wondered how it would work out for a girl whose only goal in the game was to find a gamer boyfriend...

"I joined a beginner-friendly guild, and... Oh! They just said we're going to do a quest!"

Curious, I continued watching over her shoulder as she played. There were seven players from the guild, including Kokoro, going on the quest. After following the map for a while, they reached a big dragon and started poking at it with their weapons.

“I’m the only beginner in the party, actually...”

“I see—Wait, where are you going?!” I exclaimed, confused by how Kokoro had started running in the direction opposite to everyone else, including away from the dragon boss.

“Ahhh! I just tapped the wrong key! Keyboard controls are so hard...”

Is it really okay to let her join the quest when she can’t even run in the right direction?!

“Finally! I got closer to the bo— Hey!” she shouted at the screen. She’d managed to run toward the dragon, or, more accurately, *into* the dragon.

“Did you not even expect to take any damage from *that*?” I asked in disbelief.

“I can’t help it! I’m just a newbie okay?!”

“Maybe... But you certainly aren’t naturally talented when it comes to gaming.”

“Then join my guild and help me out! If you start playing too then, maybe—who knows? You could even meet a girl!” she said.

“I-If you need my help that much... I guess I might as well.”

I went up to my room and grabbed my laptop, bringing it down and putting it next to Kokoro’s. As I turned it on, I couldn’t help but consider her suggestion. She was so bad at this game that meeting guys should have been the last of her concerns, but, if I turned out to be a better player than her (which was pretty likely), then finding a girlfriend wouldn’t be out of the question for me.

Also, I’d heard plenty of stories myself about people finding their soul mates in MMOs. In my case, though, I’d only read about it online.

I downloaded and installed *LRD*—short for *Legend Red Dragon*—the game that Kokoro was playing. Meanwhile, she continued dying over and over without being of any help whatsoever to her more experienced party members.

“Oh, I’m done with the installation. I guess I’ll start creating my character...” I said, choosing a female avatar and moving some sliders to customize her appearance.

“Hm... Wait, what?” Kokoro said, looking over at my screen. “Why are you trying to play as a girl?”

“Huh? Why wouldn’t I? If I’m going to stare at a character the whole time, it might as well be a cute girl.”

“You’re missing the point! Like, how are you going to make *real* cute girls fall in love with you if you’re too busy pretending to be one?” she asked.

“Y-You’re right! I hadn’t thought of that!”

“Are you dumb?”

Thanks to Kokoro, I realized that if my character looked like a girl, other players would probably assume that I was one. Since finding my own gamer boyfriend probably wasn’t the best course of action, I changed my avatar to a male one. I chose some cooler-looking stuff from the free-to-play options and loaded up the tutorial.

The controls were easy enough for anyone who’d played this kind of game before, so I quickly got used to them. Then, I joined the same guild as Kokoro and joined another quest with some of the members.

I quickly found out that the other guild members were a bunch of nice, helpful players. Had they not been, after all, there’s no way they would have let noobs like Kokoro join.

Including me, the guild member register only listed two guys. The other seven members, including Kokoro, were all girls. They were all really helpful right from the start, but two in particular were extra nice to me: “Yumemiya Sumire,” a cute, childish-looking character with twintails and a frilly dress, and “Ice Queen,” a tall sword-bearing grown-up lady with blue hair.

Most communication in *LRD* happened over the text chat, as there was no voice option. The people playing as the two aforementioned characters had a very cute, girlish way of typing, making them sound as if they were roleplaying the characters themselves.

Yumemiya Sumire: Kageyan, you’re really a beginner?
You’re so good! ^_^

Ice Queen: Let's do our best together, okay?

"I might have been missing out by always playing as a girl..." I mumbled to myself. Since the only other male member wasn't playing today, it was just me—as the newbie hero "Kageyan"—surrounded by girls. It was a bit awkward at first, but, to be honest, it felt pretty good—like having my own personal online harem.

"Yumemiya and Ice Queen are really kind. I didn't know that girls like that even existed," I commented, this time to Kokoro.

"Wow, already falling for girls on your first day?! At this rate, they'll kick you out because you're just trying to get with all of them!" she replied.

"I-I didn't mean it like that... It's not like you're one to talk anyway!"

We played *LRD* together until six or so, when I had to quit to prepare dinner. Kokoro was still too busy playing.

"Nishina! Dinner's ready! Stop playing and come eat!" I called out to her, feeling instantly ashamed of how much I sounded like my mom.

"I can't believe it..." she giggled quietly to herself as she headed toward the table.

"What can't you believe? You died again?"

"He's so cool..." she said as her eyes took the shape of two big hearts.



“Huh? Who is?”

“You know that there’s another guy in the guild, right? You know, Black Rain? He just logged in earlier... and he’s super cool!” she squealed, barely containing her excitement.

We continued our conversation as we started eating.

“Cool as in...” I said, “his character looks cool?”

“No! I mean yes! He does *look* cool, but that’s not the point! The way he writes, the way he fights—everything he does is the coolest! And he’s so strong! He helped me out so much! I could cry just thinking about it!” she said, now making no effort to contain herself.

I know where this is going...

“So... You fell in love with this Black Rain guy, didn’t ya?” I asked almost rhetorically.

“What? N-No! I just... I couldn’t fall in love with someone without even knowing their face, could I?! It’s for sure not like that!” she denied with a suspicious amount of intensity.

That’s true. How crazy would it be to fall in love with someone you’ve never met?

After dinner, we both logged back into *LRD*.

This game’s smooth mechanics and awesome combat system... didn’t really matter at all to me. The real reason I was having any fun was because of the other guild members. They were all so kind and welcoming that just being around them was enough to make my day. I was sure Kokoro must have felt the same.

Black Rain, the guy she’d been talking about, did indeed look cool, and he was as kind as the rest of the members, particularly toward women.

This guy must be so popular... I guess he is popular already, at least in-game.

From then on, Kokoro and I logged in every single day.

Ice Queen: Hi, Kageyan! You're early today!

Kageyan: Hi! It's because school was over early today!

Yumemiya Sumire: High school is tough, isn't it? So many classes!

We'd gradually grown close enough to know more about each other. Yumemiya and Ice Queen were always happy to chat with me, and they even taught me a lot of stuff about the game. As a result, I opened up to them myself.

It turned out that Yumemiya Sumire was in university, while Ice Queen was working as a freelancer, so both had a lot more time to spend playing than Kokoro and I did.

To thank them for helping me with quests, I occasionally gifted them some premium items and accessories. It wasn't anything expensive, but they always looked so happy to receive something small and sparkly that it made me feel warm inside.

Doing something for someone you like... This feels really good. Maybe if I spent less money on food and gacha games, I could buy them better presents.

Kokoro, too, was always following Black Rain around. She hadn't for a second stopped running her mouth about how "super cool" he was.

LRD had become my happiest place to be, and I suspected that the same was true for Kokoro.

"Wouldn't it be awesome if we had a guild meetup?" I asked Kokoro one day, right after we'd finished our dinner.

"Oooh, yeah! It'd be so cool!" she immediately agreed.

Lately, I'd started thinking of how much I wanted to actually meet Yumemiya and Ice Queen. I couldn't help but imagine—though I knew this assumption wasn't based on anything logical—that they were just as cute in real life as they were in-game.

"But we're newbies... and also the youngest ones there. We can't just suggest that they should meet up with a couple of high schoolers," I said sadly.

“Yeah,” Kokoro replied, “but I really wanna meet Black Rain. Awaah! Can you imagine?! There must be a way to do it!”

Would you look at Miss “I can’t fall in love with someone whose face I don’t know”!

“Oh, right!” she remembered. “Yesterday, actually, I asked him for his real name! Maybe I can be super sneaky and find his Twitter or Instagram!”

“That sounds like something a stalker would say.”

Kokoro completely ignored my comment and promptly started googling her virtual crush.

“Yes! His Facebook profile is public!” she exclaimed, delighted.

“Are you sure that’s really him and not just someone with the same name?”

“Hm, I can’t really tell since there’s no profile picture. Wait, I’ll look at his posts.”

She started scrolling down with wide-eyed concentration.

“Ah-ha!” she blurted out after a while. “There’s a post about *LRD*! It’s really him!”

“You’re sure?!”

“And there’s a pi...”

Hm? Was she going to say “picture”? Why did she stop? What picture?

“What’s wrong, Nishina?” I said, as, moments later, her head fell down, smashing onto the table.

“Hey?! Are you all right?!” I asked, truly concerned.

“There’s also a picture...” she started to say again.

“That’s cool and all but...”

“And it’s a picture from before we joined the guild... when they met up IRL...” she explained with her face still smushed against the table.

“Really?! Then maybe Yumemiya and Ice Queen are also on there! What’s wrong with *you* anyway?” I questioned. She handed me her phone without

saying a word.

“Ah.”

Staring back at me were three seriously unattractive men in their late thirties or early forties: a fat one, a bald one and one with glasses. Far from being “cool,” all three of them were oily, unkempt, aggressively uncool middle-aged men.

“If you read the description,” Kokoro said, “it says who they are. From the left: Yumemiya Sumire, Ice Queen and... Black Rain...”

“Eeeeegh?!” I was so shocked that all I managed to offer was a squeal I didn’t even know my throat was capable of making.

The people in the picture were also tagged: Toshio “Yumemiya” Yamada, and Takashi “Ice Queen” Tokuda. They’d even used their in-game names as nicknames.

Neither Kokoro nor I logged back into *Legend Red Dragon* ever again.

7

“You totally can’t trust the internet. It’s much safer to meet people IRL...” Kokoro told me while we were having breakfast. Judging by how heartbroken she sounded, she still hadn’t slept off the shock of the *LRD* incident.

Before I knew it, we’d already reached two whole months of living together. I’d recently started trying my best to follow her advice and make myself more presentable.

It wasn’t actually worth the effort of playing *LRD* every day, since I’d never have met anyone immediately. I’d stopped bothering now anyway.

I’m going to do my best and find a real otaku girlfriend! I thought to myself with determination. I was doing my hair in front of the mirror, just as Kokoro had taught me.

“My hair’s all fixed up now! How does it look?” I asked her once I was done.

“It looks better than it used to, I guess...” she sighed. She probably was too depressed to even care right now.

I wish she’d take a proper look...

“Good morning!” Ai greeted me in the classroom, swaying toward my desk with that charming smile on his face.

This guy... If only he wasn’t so offensive all of the time, he’d look cuter than your average girl...

“Your hair’s different!” he commented, eyeballing my head.

He noticed?! So he’s cute on the inside too... I mean, he’s a boy, but...

“Oh, this? I put wax on it!”

“Don’t say it like you’re the first caveman to make the incredible discovery of putting wax in your hair. Pretty much every boy in the school does it, Kagetora.”

“R-Really...?”

“But hey, you’ve been fixing those eyebrows too, haven’t you?” he questioned, pulling up my bangs with his hand.

Kokoro hadn’t noticed it at all, but I’d also started plucking and trimming my eyebrows the way she’d instructed.

“S-So, how does it look?” I asked Ai, since he was the closest I got to a female perspective these days.

“Better than that jungle you were sporting before, but... they’re a bit off.”

All that effort just to be told my eyebrows are “a bit off.” Great.

I looked carefully at Ai, who was the very image of the cleanliness that Kokoro had described in such detail. His eyebrows were neat, his skin was clear, his hair was silky, his eyes were bright, and he smelled so good... *Wait, no, where am I going with this?*

“Say, Ai, why don’t you have a girlfriend?” I asked him out of the blue. I just wondered why he’d go through all that effort if he wasn’t looking for a girlfriend. He crossdressed and all, but, deep down, he was still a guy.

“Where’s this come from all of a sudden? I just don’t want one. I have my otaku hobbies, so what more could I need?”

Could he even fall in love with a girl if he’s like a girl himself? It wouldn’t surprise me if he said that he only dates girls that are cuter than him or something.

“You’re always stuck in those daydreams about getting a girlfriend, aren’t you?” he taunted.

“I’m not daydreaming! I’m serious about it! But while we’re on the subject... don’t you have any female cosplayer friends?”

I’d been too embarrassed to ask my friends for a long time, but beggars can’t be choosers.

“You think *I’m* going to introduce you to my friends?! They’d think it was some kind of joke and hate me for it!” he smirked.

“Whoa! That’s too rude even for you!”

“But, jokes aside, I do know some cosplayers, but I wouldn’t call them friends. We’ve just cosplayed together a couple of times, so they’re not going to be looking to little old *moi* to set them up,” he explained.

“I see...” I sighed with disappointment, realizing I couldn’t count on him.

“How do other otaku get girlfriends?! I’m clueless here!” I wailed in despair.

“If you’re gonna be that desperate, I guess there’s this one cosplayer girl I know who found a boyfriend at an offline meetup, or something similar,” Ai said.

“Offline meetup? Like, for people who know each other from a game?” My stomach twisted at the thought.

“No, not that kind. It was an old-fashioned thing, like you find on forums or old social networks.”

“Things like those still exist?! Oh, but, right... You probably can’t join if you’re underage anyway...”

“Actually,” he said, “this girl is still in high school.”

“Seriously?!”

A meetup that any otaku can join, no matter what age?! This is just what Nishina and I have been looking for!

“Thanks, Ai! This is great!”

“D-Don’t get so close to me!” he barked, pulling away from me the second I put my hands on his shoulders.

For the rest of the day, instead of listening to the teachers, I spent most of class sneakily looking for otaku meetups on my phone.

When I got back home, I noticed that the lights in the living room were on, so Kokoro was already back.

“Nishina! I’ve found it! I have the answer!” I shouted as I rushed inside.

“Shhh! What’s your deal? Don’t be so loud...”

“Just look at this!” I said, ignoring her protests and handing her my phone.

The page I showed her was a relic of ancient times, a social network that existed long before Twitter and Instagram. It turned out that the biggest offline meetups were scheduled through this almost extinct platform.

“Offline otaku meetup in Tokyo...?” She read the content aloud.

“It’s next Saturday!” I started elaborating, hurrying to get the words out of my mouth fast enough. “There’ll be about a hundred people, and it’ll be held in an event space not too far away from here! Everyone can join, as long as they like manga, anime, games, or anything else like that! And here’s the best part! There’ll be no alcohol at the event either, so we can join too!”

“Y-You’re a genius! I haven’t used this site in years! I’ll try to remember my password!” she said.

Having broken the good news to Kokoro, I joined that page’s community and signed up for their meetup.

Kokoro had some trouble logging in and had to reset her password, but she managed it eventually and signed up for the meetup too.

“Now that it’s decided, I *have* to buy some new clothes,” she said. “I think I’ll cosplay Yumeno☆Saki, you know? Like, the page said that everyone’s welcome to cosplay, and if there are going to be a ton of girls, I have to stand out from the crowd! But, er, you know... I also need you to help me shop for the sort of clothes that otaku guys are into. What if I meet someone super hot at the event and we decide to go on a date right after? I have to be prepared!”

“Oh, sure!”

Since Kokoro was pretty to begin with, just changing up her usual hairstyle, makeup, and clothes to something a little cuter would make her irresistible to any otaku.

“Perfect! Then, this Saturday, after school... Let’s. Go. Shoppiiiing!”

* * *

Later that week, on Saturday.

I woke up one hour before the time we were supposed to leave the house

and headed down to the living room.

On my way, I saw Kokoro, already up and curling her hair with a curling iron.

“Morning,” she greeted me.

“Good morning. You’re up early, huh... Huh?!”

Who the hell is this cutesy, innocent-looking girl?! I asked myself, seeing the clothes she’d chosen. A white blouse with lace and frills and a pink skirt that actually reached her knees.

Her makeup, understated and natural, was different too. Even her eyelashes were of normal human length, and her cheeks and lips were a nice, soft shade of pink.

As much as I hated admitting it, she looked terribly cute. *Terribly*. But why? She wasn’t going on a date today...

“What are you staring at?” she asked. “If you’ve got some kind of problem with me, just spit it out already! Y-You were the one who told me I should try to look, like, ‘innocent’ and ‘natural,’ or whatever. You better not complain now!”

“Huh?! Why would I complain?! You look perfect! This is a thousand times better than your usual getup!” I said, not meaning to raise my voice.

Does she seriously think that this doesn’t look good?! Is she blind?!

“What? F-For real?” she asked. For a fraction of a second, her cheeks flushed brighter than usual.

“Yeah, but... why dress like that now?”

“I figured I’d better get used to this kind of thing as soon as possible, so I looked through my closet and matched my outfit to that picture you showed me. I bought these, like, yeeears ago, but I thought I’d grown out of this cutesy stuff so I don’t wear them any more... So, say that I showed up to a date dressed like this... would that be bad?”

“No! You don’t look bad at all!” I reassured her.

“*You don’t look bad’...?* You really don’t know how to compliment a girl, do you? Anyway, I think I get it. While we’re shopping, help me choose more of

this kind of thing, okay? To be honest, I'm a bit scared of relying on *your* fashion sense, but I have no choice."

"Don't worry, I got you!"

Kokoro and I got on the train to Harajuku. It's supposedly Tokyo's main fashion district, but I'd only seen the place on TV.

"I can't really spend much today, to be honest," I told her. That month, other than my usual daily expenses and otaku necessities, I'd already bought the grooming tools Kokoro had told me to, I'd been to an expensive hair salon, and I'd bought several in-game presents for two... middle-aged men. I didn't have a lot of cash left.

"Hm, let's check WEGO first then," Kokoro said.

Following her lead, I got off the train at Harajuku station, left through the Omotesando exit, and turned right into a huge street. We carried on until we reached a crossroads, then turned left again to find ourselves in front of WEGO, the shop that she was talking about.

I stuck to her heels as we went inside. All the customers in here, both men and women, looked fashionable. If I were by myself, there's no way I'd have entered a store like this.

I grabbed the label of the first piece of clothing I could find: 2,149 yen.

"Hey, you were right! It's not that expensive!" I told Kokoro, with a sigh of relief. "So this is where all the normies go to buy their clothes."

She went off by herself to look down all the aisles, so I started wandering around too, with no particular aim in mind.

"Oh, this isn't bad," I said to myself, grabbing a red and black camo T-shirt. "It's definitely eye-catching!"

Kokoro appeared at my side, her large, blank eyes staring at me. It was already clear that she didn't approve.

"Maybe there's someone out there that can wear that and look good—emphasis on maybe. But a fashion disaster like you wearing that is just cringey!"

Of all the clothes in this store, did you really have to choose *that*? I just don't get it! That weird outfit at the otaku party, the even weirder one you wore to Akihabara, and now *this*...?" she said, despairing as she gestured toward the shirt in my hands.

Her expression drained every drop of confidence that I had left in my fashion sensibilities.

"Then, what about... this one?" I said, grabbing a green flannel shirt.

"Again," she said, "*maybe* someone who actually knew what they were doing could pull that off, but if you put that on, it'd look totally geeky! Just imagine a dork with that shirt, a backpack, and glasses! He'd be the main attraction in the Otaku History Museum!"

I looked back at the shirt I was holding. *Maybe she's right....*

"Ugh. B-But then, that just means that everything looks good on fashionable people—I'm just going to look like a cringey, geeky otaku no matter what I wear, according to you!"

"Not at all! Check this out," she said, handing me a white T-shirt. It was much simpler than the ones I'd shown her.

"Just a simple shirt and a pair of *nice* jeans, and you'll look like a totally different person!" she said.

"R-Really? Wouldn't that be kind of bland?"

"Simple and *clean*, not 'bland.' It's better than wearing loads of flashy stuff that doesn't look good on you! I read this in a magazine once, but, like, people are basically attracted to people with fashion sense similar to their own. Like, if you really wanna date a gyaru, dress all bright and garish. If you wanna date someone who's into gothic lolita stuff, you should go all dark and princely. So, if you wanna date a girl that dresses normally, you should dress normally too! Most normal otaku girls want to see a guy's face first, not his loud-ass outfit."

"I see..." I said, taking mental notes of her explanation. It was pretty convincing.

"You could try layering something like this... or this..." she said, pulling other

things from the shelves.

She'd picked a T-shirt with blue stripes and a gray short-sleeved hoodie. It had a motivational quote slapped across the front in white letters: "NOTHING IS WORTH IT IF YOU AREN'T HAPPY." Both were simple though.

"Okay! I'll buy this one then!" I said, taking the hoodie, which I kind of liked anyway, from her hands and heading for the cashier.

"Wait! You haven't even tried it on!"

"Do I really need to?" I groaned, not sure why she'd want me to go through so much hassle.

"Of course! That's, like, the most basic thing! Even the best clothes look horrible if they're too tight or too baggy! Size is vital! And, don't forget, you need to see if it looks good on you or not," she pointed out, handing me a pair of black jeans that looked way too small for me—*"That's how skinny jeans are supposed to look!"*—to try on as well.

"Hm..." she mumbled, "I think a medium is too big for you, but I don't think they have a small for this shirt..."

"Glad to know I look thin then! Haha!"

"Just so you know, looking thin isn't a good thing," she said.

"What?" I asked, confused.

"You don't need to be buff or anything, but guys should have *some* muscle on them! My friends would totally agree. Boys who look like walking matchsticks aren't hot at all!"

"Walking... matchsticks...?"

Is this a nerd vs stud kind of thing? I've never exercised. Not a day in my life. Of course I don't have any muscles.

"The jeans fit fine though," Kokoro said.

"They're a bit loose around the waist."

"If you have the money, get a belt too, then."

"O-Okay."

“Oh, and shoes! Take those horrible kiddie sneakers you’re wearing and throw them in the trash, before I do!”

“There’s no need to throw them away, is there? They’re still wearable!” I protested.

I eventually bought the jeans, shirt, and hoodie. I already had to try them for size, so I decided to test them out for the rest of the day. Walking outside with brand new, fashionable clothes made me a bit nervous.

Now it was my turn to help Kokoro find a new outfit, so we went to an underground department store on Takeshita Street. The shop that Kokoro had decided on, Amavel Classic, perfectly delivered my virgin-killer dreams. Every single item on display was cute and frilly.

“Seeing lolita stuff like this in person hits different,” Kokoro said. “They’re cute, very cute, but I’d never choose something like this myself.”

“Very cute indeed. Wow, look at this! This is awesome!” I said, pointing at the outfit that made my virgin senses tingle the most. It was a high-cut burgundy dress over a lacy blouse.

“This?! I guess it’s cute, sure but... my friends would die laughing if I showed up wearing something like that.”

“Who cares? You’re not going to wear it in front of your friends.”

“Well, I guess you have a point...” she said as she took the dress from me and made her way to the fitting room, still looking unconvinced.

Being left alone in such a girly shop made me extremely uncomfortable. I’d never been more relieved when Kokoro returned.

“A-Are you serious? This doesn’t look good on me at all,” she said, awkwardly fidgeting in the clothes I’d chosen for her.

I was at a loss for words. She looked murderously cute. Just the sight of her was enough to kill hundreds of virgins, and if I didn’t know her already, I’d have risked falling in love at first sight myself.

“Wh-What is it?! Say something! Don’t just stare at me silently like that! Does it look *that* bad?!” she cried.

“Bad?! Are you out of your mind?! It’s so cute that any... *Ahem*, I-I think that this makes you look better than anything you’ve worn in front of me so far!”

“Seriously...? J-Just know that if this doesn’t work, I’ll kill you.”

“It will work! And anyway, who doesn’t love a virgin-killer outfit!”

She still wasn’t entirely convinced, but, after a little persuasion, she finally caved in.

“Well, I’m already wearing it, so I guess I’ll keep it on too!” she said before leaving the store.

I’m spending the rest of the day with Nishina dressed like that? Now I’m even more nervous...

We went into a shoe shop on the same street, and Kokoro chose a new pair of sneakers for me. I’d never bought trendy shoes like these in my life.

“You kinda also need a new bag, but... do you have any money left?” she asked me.

“Barely enough to take the train home.”

“In that case, just go to the meetup without one.”

“But I always go out with a bag!” I told her.

“Just put your phone and wallet in your pocket. The girls in my class say that it’s much better having no bag than having an ugly one. Bags aren’t really *in* right now anyway.”

“But...just my phone and wallet?” I asked.

“I mean, what else do you need?”

I’d be more comfortable if I were able to carry more stuff with me, but the only bags I had were my backpack and a battered shoulder bag I’d been using since middle school, so I thought it’d be better to just follow her advice.

“Whew! That was tiring, but now we’re all set!” I said when we were finally done shopping.

“Say... do you have anywhere you need to be after this?” Kokoro asked.

“Not really. Why?”

“It’s just that, since we’ve bought all these clothes, isn’t it a bit of a waste just to go back home? Why don’t we, like, go get coffee?”

“S-Sure...”

Wait, would that make this a date? N-No, that can’t be right...

“There’s this place I really want to go to,” she started explaining, “and they have these ultra cute desserts! They look sooo good, really! I’d get the best pics!”

“W-Wait a second!” Kokoro was skipping so excitedly that she was almost running, so I had to stumble along to keep up with her.

And so, both of us dressed in our new date clothes, I hurried after her from store to store as Kokoro bought all kinds of photogenic sweets.

8

A week passed, and it was finally time for the otaku meetup.

I followed the notes I'd taken while listening to Kokoro, starting to prepare almost two hours before leaving the house. I even wore the clothes she'd chosen. The sounds coming from the other bedroom told me that she was already up too.

During the past week, I'd watched the whole of *Next Stage*, since Kokoro had told me that knowing loads about the anime would be enough to have a conversation with most otaku girls. Even though I'd only watched it once, I felt like I'd be able to talk about it, at least superficially.

Meanwhile, she'd spent the week researching otaku content aimed at boys and learning more about the virgin-killer outfits I'd told her about.

She'd told me that she still needed to get more comfortable wearing everyday otaku fashion, so she'd change into her cosplay when we got to the event in case she met someone before or after it.

"Ichigaya! Are you ready to go?" Kokoro called from outside my room.

On the other side of the door, every otaku's dream was waiting for me. She'd followed all my advice on hair, makeup, clothing... everything.

"Oh wow, check you out! But I guess it's totally expected, since I chose your clothes and all that," she said. I decided to take that as a compliment.

"So, what are we waiting for?!" she shouted. "Let's go! We got this!"

"Yeah! Let's go!" I replied, and we left the house all pumped up and ready to find our otaku dates.

We had to go all the way to Ikebukuro for the meetup. When we finally reached the event space, we were met with a huge line of people already waiting to get inside.

After making our way through reception together, Kokoro went to a changing room to put on her cosplay, and I, much to my dismay, was left alone.

I looked around and saw that, despite it being an event for otaku, there was a decent amount of attractive people, both boys and girls. Some of the cosplayers were pretty cute too.

It was at this point that I realized a fatal mistake in my plan. I'd bought decent clothes, groomed myself enough to look presentable, and I'd even watched an anime that girls like, but I hadn't—not even for a second—thought to bother learning how to talk to girls I don't know. Even if I found a girl I liked, I had absolutely no idea how I was supposed to act.

Thanks to my personal fashion advisor, I felt better about how I looked than when I'd joined that first otaku party, and having daily conversations with Kokoro should have made me more comfortable around the opposite sex, but... no matter how much I looked at the girls in front of me, I couldn't imagine myself speaking to any of them.

Anyway, the cosplayer who caught my eye the most was actually a dude. Between his delicate facial features and the fact that most of the cosplayers at the event were women, I'd almost mistaken him for one at first. The giveaway had been his height—he was too tall to be a girl.

The cosplayer, in his gray suit, had blond hair and tan skin, unmistakably cosplaying Omuro from *Detective Donan*. It's a really famous anime that *everyone* knew about.

The movie had recently been a huge hit, and Kokoro swore that, right now, it was the “*hottest* series among otaku girls.” She loved it too and recorded the new episodes every week.

The event had barely even started, but “Omuro” was already surrounded by a hoard of girls.

Tsk... Curse you and your good looks!

I briefly wondered whether I should have followed Kokoro's lead and come here in cosplay, but she probably wouldn't want me to dress up as a popular character that I knew nothing about. I still hadn't miraculously gained the good

looks I needed to pull it off anyway.

I noticed Kokoro coming out of the dressing room. Relieved, I started walking toward her, but a couple of strangers, two men, beat me to it.

“You’re Yumeno☆Saki, aren’t you?!” one of them asked.

“Y-Yes, I am!” she replied.

Her cosplay was already attracting attention, and I couldn’t say I was surprised. I thought it’d be rude to butt in now, so I kept some distance between us, letting her have her moment.

As expected of a cute girl cosplaying a popular character, before long, she was surrounded by men.

“I’m sorry, a friend is waiting for me,” she said after a while, cutting short the conversation with the strangers around her and coming my way.

“Why didn’t you help me back there?!” she demanded to know.

“Huh? Help? I didn’t want to bother you while you were talking with those people. I mean, I wasn’t going to intrude on your chance to find an otaku boyfriend.”

“Finding an otaku boyfriend?” she scoffed. “From those guys? Listen, like, it doesn’t matter how many people come up to me if none of them are actually my type! I don’t want to waste my whole time here prancing around for *them*!”

“So none of them were your type?”

“Did you leave your eyes at home?” she asked, pouting angrily.

I could see where she was coming from, but, as always, I wished she’d learn how to say it a little more tactfully.

You mean that out of all those guys, not even one was up to your standards? How handsome does a guy have to be to date you?!

“It’s not like I can tell. I’m not into men,” I replied.

“Okay, *sure*. Then, let’s do it like this. If I actually find someone cute, I’ll wink at you. So, if you see me winking, leave the two of us alone, or help me, like, approach him if I haven’t yet. But if I don’t wink, that means that the people

around me are not my type, so come and help me!" she said.

"Am I your bodyguard or something?!"

"I'll totally do the same thing for you, don't worry! If you find a girl who's your type, just tell me and I'll help you talk to her for sure!"

"A-Are you serious?!"

Nishina! My savior! My angel!

"We have to look out for each other, right?" she said.

"Right! I've got your back then!"

With an ally like Kokoro by my side, I no longer had anything to fear.

We still hadn't gotten our free drinks, so Kokoro and I headed toward the drinks booth.

"Wait, what?!" Kokoro stopped me, whispering in shock as she stared across the room. "That can't be... No..."

"What is it?"

"I-It's Bambi! My favorite cosplayer! A-And he's cosplaying Omuro, my favorite character from *Donan*!"

I followed her gaze and found the handsome cosplayer I'd been directing my envy at a few minutes earlier.

"Isn't that the guy you tried to hit up on Twitter and failed?" I asked her.

"Yes! That's the one, that's him! I totally can't believe it! He's really here! I get to see him in person!" she said, putting a hand over her mouth in awe.

He was attractive enough to even catch *my* attention, so I imagined that any otaku girl, especially one as obsessed with handsome men as Kokoro, would swoon all over the floor the second they saw him.

"He's just as handsome as in his pics! It wasn't filters! He really looks like that! Awaaaah! I can't take this! Kill me, please, before I drop dead on the spot!" she squealed under her breath, growing even more excited. "What should I do?! Can I take a picture without him noticing?! Or is that totally illegal?!"

“Go and talk to him, dummy! You’re both cosplaying!”

“B-But there are so many girls around him... Anyway, you’re both guys, so maybe you can talk to him for me, r-right?!”

“I guess I can try and... Hm?” I froze, noticing Bambi walking in our direction.

Is he... approaching us?

“Hi!” Bambi addressed us both.

“H-H-Hello!” Kokoro managed to reply.

“You’re cosplaying as Yumeno☆Saki! Oh, I just love her!”

“R-Really?! Y-You do?!”

He probably wanted to talk to Kokoro because he liked her cosplay. Somehow, as if his looks weren’t enough, his smooth voice even made him *sound* attractive.

“Thanks! I love her too! I watch her videos all the time!” she said.

And who told you to watch her videos, huh? I did! Oh well, if it turned out to be helpful, I guess I’m glad I did...

“Oh really now? Do you cosplay often?” he asked.

“I, well... I really like *IMS*, so it’s one of the cosplays I do!” she said, shooting a glance at me.

“Wow, I love *IMS* too!” Bambi smiled, dazzling us both.

“I-Is that so?! Erm, please e-excuse me, but, are you Bambi? Actually, I follow you on Twitter!”

“Oh?! You know me? I never thought I’d meet a follower in a place like this! Thanks for the follow! Let me know how to find you, then I can follow you back!”

“Wha—?!” Kokoro choked.

“So, what’s your Twitter handle?”

“I-It’s 2-Heart! ‘At,’ number two, hyphen, Heart! Th-Thank you so much! And, I just wanted to say that your Omuro cosplay is super wonderful! I love Omuro!

The Kaoru cosplay you posted the other day was awesome too! I never thought I'd be able to meet you in person! I've never been happier in my life!"

"Whoa, you're making me blush! I'm happy I could meet you too. And this is... a friend of yours?" he asked, nodding in my direction.

"He's just a friend, yes! From school!" Kokoro replied, offensively fast.

"He's good-looking though," he said.

"Huh...?" I replied, unable to process the fact that I'd just been called "good-looking" for the first time in my life.

Me? Good-looking? Is this guy all right? Is his tie on too tight or something?

"With just a little makeup, you'd look breathtaking in cosplay. Say, won't you cosplay with me sometime?" he asked me.

He reached out with his hand and started caressing my face. At that very moment I heard a high-pitched squeal from across the room.

I was too distracted to notice earlier, but Kokoro had been joined by several other girls who were staring at Bambi and me, whispering to each other and, for some reason, looking completely infatuated.

What exactly is going on here?!

"I dig this pairing! Attractive x average!" murmured one of the girls to another one close to her.

Hey, I heard that! I thought, well aware that I wasn't the attractive one of this duo, but I reasoned that, at least, it was better than *attractive x abysmal*.

"I-I'll consider it, thanks..." I replied to Bambi's offer, not wanting to seem impolite in front of such a crowd. I already knew I wasn't attractive enough for cosplay, but if we cosplayed side by side, my mug would just make his look even more handsome.

"Want to add each other on LINE?" he then asked Kokoro.

"What?! Really?!"

This was a turn of events that I never could've predicted. We'd found a guy who was not only Kokoro's type, but her favorite cosplayer, and he'd

approached us all by himself. Kokoro would've pulled it off eventually, being as attractive as she is, but I didn't expect it to happen this fast.

"And you too," Bambi said, looking at me expectantly.

"What? Uh? S-Sure..."

This guy... He's gotta be asking me too because if he only asks Nishina, it'd be way too obvious that he's hitting on her.

I didn't really want to add this dude, but, since I couldn't really refuse, I showed him my QR code. He added both of us, that handsome smile never leaving his face for a second.

"I-I think I'll go grab that drink," I said, making my escape and leaving Kokoro alone with him.

Seeing Kokoro achieve so much in so little time left me both impressed and concerned. At this rate, she was going to end the day with a handsome cosplayer's LINE contact while I remained empty-handed.

I didn't want it to happen, obviously, but, now that I was alone, approaching girls felt impossible again.

I watched Bambi and Kokoro from a distance. He obviously had his sights set on her. He'd dodged that whole crowd of girls just to talk to her, and he'd even asked for her LINE. And Kokoro was already mad about the guy. I could just see it—it was only a matter of time before they started dating.

And then... I'd be alone in my quest. The only help I had, Kokoro, would be gone. There'd be no one helping me to find spots to meet girls, no one helping me to choose clothes... nothing.

I don't want to think about it, but I can't rely on her forever, I guess. I should at least figure out how to start a conversation with a girl by myself. Saying hello is probably the hardest part! Once I do that, I'm sure it's going to be easy, I said to myself as I scanned the room.

There were several cute girls, and even some who you could say were my type. However, the cuter the girl, the harder it felt to even say hello. My fear of

rejection kept me in shackles.

All the cute ones are probably having fun chatting with someone else already anyway... Agh, no! I can't give up! I can't make the same mistake as last time! Right now, I'm not the same guy who ran away from that otaku party. Thanks to Nishina's advice, now I'm well-groomed and a pleasure to be around! I'm even wearing girl-approved clothes! And most importantly, I've also become familiar with the stuff that otaku girls like.

After the brief pep talk, I was beginning to feel that, maybe, talking to a girl was within the scope of my abilities. So I looked for a girl, any girl, that I could try and go up to.

Oh...!

I saw one, who looked around the same age as me. She was standing by herself not so far away, playing with her phone. She was slightly plumper than I'd usually go for, and her hair wasn't that impressive—her outfit in general, actually. But...

I can do this.

She wasn't even the kind of girl I'd want to make friends with, or even just talk to in any other circumstances, but that was the point. That's what made her the approachable kind of girl. Looking as bored as that, she probably wouldn't reject me, and, even if she did, it wouldn't be that big of a hit to my newfound confidence. I just had to prove to myself that I *could* talk to girls. Look, I know it's rude to think, but she was going to be my test dummy.

I walked up to her and, still more nervous than I thought I'd be, I started talking.

"H-Hello!"

"Oh? Hi..." she replied, expressionless, after the shortest glance in my direction.

This is going worse than expected... Am I so ugly that even this girl doesn't want anything to do with me? But I can't give up now! I have to start a conversation!

“D-Did you come here alone?” I asked.

“Uh? Of course not. I’m here with a friend, but she’s getting us drinks,” she replied in a low, annoyed voice.

“Oh, ha ha, right...”

I was ready to give up talking to women forever. Not only was she the opposite of cute, but she also had a bad personality—so much so that I cursed my own bad luck for making me choose her. So much for my crash course in conversation.

I began to concoct the perfect scenario to get away from her, when another girl, presumably her friend, came over to us.

“Erlina, I’m back!” she chirped.

My heart skipped a beat. This girl was slender, fair-skinned, *and* she had long black hair. She wore a cat-ear hoodie and a red checkered miniskirt with knee-high socks. Despite being very different from a virgin-killer outfit, this kind of getup would probably have a similar effect on any otaku guy. What’s more, she had big round eyes, even with so little makeup, making her face resemble that of a beautiful doll. In short, she was my ideal girl.

“And this is...?”

“This guy? He just came and started talking to me,” Girl Number One said almost smugly.

“Oh, really? I’m Mashiro Gojo! Nice to meet you!” Girl Number Two told me with a big smile. She was pretty, yet somehow still approachable, and had a really sweet voice.

“H-Hi! Nice to meet you too! I-I’m Ichigaya!” I replied, too nervous about speaking to a girl this attractive to think about using a cooler alias.

“Right, I forgot to tell you my name. I’m Erlina Kittenton,” the unfriendly girl from before said, reminding me of her existence.

Nobody asked! And no way that’s your real name!

In my head, I begged my bad luck to forgive me for the things I’d thought about it, since apparently I just had to go through the pain of talking with this

“Erlina” girl so that I could meet beautiful, perfect Mashiro.

I need to find a way to add her... Maybe if I can find something to talk about... I need a topic!

“S-So, what kind of otaku stuff do you like?” I asked, finally absorbing what Kokoro had meant when she told me that I shouldn’t judge a girl for her hobbies. Mashiro could be into the most hardcore BL in the world, for I cared. That’d just make *me* want to learn about BL.

Still, I prayed that she’d reply with “*Next Stage*.” It was the only anime for girls I knew anything about.

“Well, as for mobile games, I like *IMS*, *FGO*, *KanColle*. Oh, and lately, I’ve been getting into *Girls’ Frontline* too!” she replied.

Is this some kind of prank? She’s cute AND has the exact same tastes as me?!

“Whoa, I love all of those games! I play them every day!” I said.

“Wow, really?!” she blinked up at me eagerly.

“I like *IMS* and *TouRabū* myself. I’ve been a fan ever since they were first released, so I can’t *stand* those normies who just know them from the anime,” ~~Girl Number One~~ Erlina Kittenton said, despite nobody asking for her opinion.

“Yay! We like all the same things! We’d make great friends!” Mashiro told me with a smile so cute that I was ready to melt.

How is it possible that I just ran into a girl who happens to be this cute and shares all my interests?! What sorcery is this?! I thought, staring at her. The more I looked, the prettier she became. She was on the shorter side, about five feet, and her voice was adorably high-pitched. I’d be pressed to even imagine a girl more perfect.

Blessed be the day I decided to join this otaku meetup! Now I just have to find a way to ask her for her LINE or Twitter or something.

“Erm, so, Ichigaya, are you on Twitter? If you are, we can follow each other, if you like?” she asked.

“What?! I... O-Of course! Yes! Please!” I said, my hands literally shaking.

She isn't going to recruit me into some cult or something, is she?! I asked myself, scared by the turn in my luck today.

She told me her Twitter handle and I followed her immediately.

Mashiro Gojo, First Year HS. Streamer. Also on TikTok.
IMS / KanColle / FGØ / Kana Hanazawa fan!

Her icon was a selfie.

"You're a first year?! So you're just one year younger than me!" I said.

"Oh, really?"

"This is my Twitter account. Here you go," ~~the other, annoying one~~ Erlina Kittenton said, completely unprompted. Not having the gall to tell her that I couldn't care less about it, I ended up following her too, noting to myself to block her as soon as I was back home.

"Thanks Ichigaya! You've got a new follower now!" Mashiro said.

"Thank you too!" I replied.

A staff member passed near us, shouting. "The meetup is almost over! Please make your way toward the exit!"

I glanced at the clock on my phone—only five minutes left.

"Oh, snap!" I exclaimed, suddenly remembering Kokoro. I'd received a text from her only five minutes ago.

"I'll be in the changing room!"

"Hm? You gotta go meet someone?" Mashiro asked, her large eyes blinking directly at me.

"Yeah..."

"Okay then, see ya' another time! It was a fun chat!"

"It was fun for me too! See you around!" I replied.

I left Mashiro and... Erlina Kittenton and went to the toilet.

I still hadn't quite processed my incredible luck today. Not only had I finally

met my dream girl, but *she* had asked *me* to become mutuals on Twitter! My heart was threatening to jump out of my chest with excitement.

I'm so glad I came here. Miracles really do happen if you put in the effort...

I entered an empty stall and sat down for a number two. Right after I flushed, I heard voices on the other side of the door. One of them was strangely familiar to me.

"You're unbelievable, man. You got chicks all over you," the first voice said.

"Haha, I gotta thank my cosplay for that. They all fall for Omuro," the second responded.

Slightly disturbed by what I was hearing, I remained perched on my toilet seat to silently eavesdrop.

"Hah! Just the cosplay, my ass! How many did you add on LINE today?"

"About twenty, I think. You should be more impressed by how I managed to reject the ugly ones without any drama."

"Haha, you never miss. You even added that cute Yumeno☆Saki cosplayer, right?"

"Oh, that one, yeah, she was totally dumbstruck. Looks like she was into me to begin with—one of my fans."

This voice... It's got to be that Omuro cosplayer from earlier! But he's way ruder than before, and the things he's saying are disgusting too! Wait... "that cute Yumeno☆Saki cosplayer"? That's gotta be Nishina!

"So, who's gonna be the lucky one?"

"Hey, choosing just one isn't that easy. I guess I'll have to date a bunch of them first."

"Oh, screw you. I wish I could say something like that!"

I heard the laughter of the two men fade with their footsteps, getting gradually farther away from me. I was so shocked by what I'd just heard that I couldn't get up for a while.

Kokoro had finished changing ages ago. When I finally left the toilet, she tried her best to be annoyed at me, but the trace of a grin remained at the corners of her mouth.

“What took you so long?!” she asked me, not waiting for a response. “I got to chat with Bambi more after you left! I’m so glad I came here!” she said.

“I-I see...”

I couldn’t help but sigh as I wondered whether I should tell her about what I’d just heard.

Do I really have to destroy her happiness?

That guy had sounded like he was only here to get into bed with as many girls as he could count on four hands, but maybe I was just overreacting. But even if I *was* overreacting, the dude didn’t have a single ounce of respect for girls and was disgustingly full of himself.

“What’s up with the sighing?” Kokoro asked.

“Well, it’s just...” I started looking around, making sure Bambi wasn’t nearby. “I just think you’d better stay away from him.”

“Huh?”

If I told her exactly what I’d heard him say, it would probably only hurt her feelings, and I couldn’t bring myself to do it. But I’d be the bigger asshole if I let a douchebag like that take advantage of her.

“Why?” she asked, surprisingly calm.

“I-I saw him add a ton of girls on his LINE, you know...”

“What’s weird about *that*? He’s super popular!”

“And, you know... coming to an event like *this* in a cosplay like *that* kind of means that he’s here to get girls...” I said, remembering that he’d said that himself.

“The same goes for me though! What’s so bad about wanting a little bit of attention? *And* he already said that he likes anime for girls too! Don’t tell me you’re jealous of how handsome he is?”

“What?!”

“A-And I wasn’t going to say anything, but now it’s come to this, I might as well—I saw you speaking with that girl earlier! She may have looked cute, but...there’s something really off about her. I haven’t talked to her, but I’ve seen her around other people, so I know for real! There’s no way that ear-splitting squeak is how she normally talks. She hit on so many guys, you should have seen her! A-And, I mean, did you see how she dresses? She’s totally here just to get a load of guys too, *for sure!*” Kokoro said.

“Wh-Where did you pull that one from when you haven’t even spoken to her?! You should know that she’s a really pleasant, wonderful—”

“Ohhh. So you fancy her.”

“Huh?! Ugh, fine! Whatever! You do you then!” I shouted, furious, storming off by myself to head back home on my own.

I was trying to warn her! For her sake! Why did she have to insult Gojo like that?!

I genuinely believed that I had Kokoro to thank if I managed to become friends with Mashiro. What she’d taught me about grooming, fashion, and otaku girl anime had given me the confidence to start up a conversation in the first place, and it’d made me presentable enough for Mashiro to be friendly with me. I wanted to tell her that I’d found the girl of my dreams, that I was very happy about it, and I owed so much of it to her. But then she went and ruined it by saying all that horrible stuff...

And so, as our conversation ended, the Cold War between me and Kokoro began.

9

“I’m going out to eat with a friend tonight.”

“Uh-huh...”

The morning after the otaku meetup, Kokoro and I had already gotten to the point where barely a word was spoken between us.

After school, I went to a family restaurant with Ai. I saw him off at the station, then headed back by myself.

Is she already there? I thought, sighing as I walked. I wasn’t looking forward to getting back home. Finding such a perfect girl at the meetup had made me overwhelmingly happy, but my argument with Kokoro had turned my mood sour pretty quickly.

As I walked, I felt my phone vibrate.

A LINE message? From Nishina? I wondered as I checked my notifications. It wasn’t a LINE message at all—it was a direct message on Twitter... from Mashiro Gojo.

G-Gojo?! Really?!

I’d wanted to reach out to her myself, but I just hadn’t found the courage. Her sending a message to *me* was enough to make my heart race.

“Hi hi! I had so much fun talking with you yesterday UwU I’d really like to see you again, if you don’t mind! ≡”

“Am I... dreaming?” I asked the empty street. I was beyond shocked.

I read the DM over and over, unable to believe my eyes.

Is she... inviting me on a date?! A cute girl?! She wants to go out on a date with me?!

I immediately replied to her, my hands shaking as I typed.

“Hello! Thanks for the DM! I’d love to meet up with you too!”

I’d only just tapped “Send,” but I was already starting to wonder if my reply was good enough.

If only I could ask Nishina what she thought...

In any case, it felt like I was making it all up. Never in a thousand years would I even dream of an angel like Mashiro asking me out.

I stumbled home faster than before, excited beyond words, alternating my glances from my phone, to see if my Mashiro had sent me another message, and up at the sky, ready to be struck by the lightning that would even out the balance of my luck.

I checked the living room, but Kokoro wasn’t there. She’d probably gone up to bed already.

After taking a bath, I looked at my phone for the billionth time, finally noticing a new Twitter notification. It was my Mashiro again.

“Yaaay! ≡ ≡ I’m so glad you wanna see me. What about... shopping in Akihabara?”

No human being had ever typed the words *“that sounds lovely, I’m free this Saturday?”* faster than I did.

“Then let’s go on Saturday! ≡ I’m already sooo excited ^o^”

She’s... excited? Excited to see me...?

She was probably still just trying to be polite, but I was too elated to care. Meeting her was my every dream coming true, but getting to go on a date with her? It was nothing short of a miracle.

Why was I even so frustrated before? This is the best day of my life! I told myself as I walked upstairs to my room.

The next morning, I found Kokoro in the living room, already up and making some toast.

“M-Morning...” I said.

“Good morning.”

Saying anything else would have made things even more awkward, so I just kept it at that and started getting ready for the day.

“Ichigaya...” Kokoro appeared at the door behind me while I was brushing my teeth.

I turned around to look at her, but she stared at me silently without continuing.

“It’s nothing,” she then said, and walked away.

What was that?

I still wanted to ask her for advice on my date with Mashiro. Where should I take her? How should I talk to her? It would have probably just been easier to swallow my pride and be the one to apologize...

More days passed by with almost no conversation between the two of us, and it was finally Saturday—time for my date with Mashiro.

I’d set my alarm for ten in the morning. When I came downstairs, I found Kokoro in front of the living room mirror, straightening her hair. I mustered up my courage to talk to her.

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Y-Yeah. I’m, er, going out with Bambi...” she said, fumbling for words.

“By going out, you mean just the two of you?! Where?” I asked her.

“Y-Yeah, just us. We’re just going to have some tea in Shinjuku...”

“Meeting that guy alone probably isn’t the best idea,” I said, trying my best to choose words that wouldn’t start another argument.

“Huh?”

“It’s not just him, you know. Remember what I told you the other time? Meeting with a guy you don’t know, just the two of you, could be dangerous.”

It was about him, obviously.

“It’s not like he’s some stranger. I’ve met him once already. He just wants to, like, talk with me about cosplay and stuff,” she said.

If only she knew his true colors! But then, I guess it’s kind of my fault since I still haven’t told her what I heard... Am I worrying too much? She’s not a kid, and she’s not stupid. It’s daytime and there’ll be loads of people around. She’ll be safe... probably.

“Why are you already up anyway? Going somewhere too?” Kokoro asked me.

“Y-Yeah. I’m going out with that girl from the meetup.”

“‘That girl’? You mean the one I warned you about?!”

“Y-Yes.”

“I see.”

Her short response marked the end of our conversation, so we both went back to preparing for our dates.

I didn’t have enough money for any more new clothes, so I had no choice but to wear the exact same outfit as during the meetup. To make up for it, I put as much effort as possible into styling my hair.

In another bizarre coincidence, Kokoro and I ran into each other in the entrance, ready to leave at the exact same moment.

“See you later, then.” she said.

“Yeah... later.”

I thought it’d be better if we didn’t walk to the station together, so I opened the door to leave while Kokoro was still putting on her shoes.

“Ah, Ichigaya,” she stopped me, and I turned back, surprised.

“Your hair looks nice today,” she said with a smile. “Do your best on that date, okay?”

I looked at her, astonished, but she averted her gaze.

“Oh... Thanks,” I replied.

I didn't see that coming. She was supposed to be mad at me and nervous about her own date. But, coming from her, those words meant a lot.

I reached the Electric Town entrance of Akihabara station five minutes early.

“Oh! I'm sooo sorry I kept you waiting!” Mashiro squeaked as she arrived perfectly on time.

Looking at her now, with the sunlight glinting off her silky black hair, she was even cuter than I'd initially thought. It reached all the way to her chest, framing her beautiful face, with her bright eyes and fair skin adorned with the lightest of makeup. She was wearing a black dress over a frilly blouse with a red ribbon, and black knee-high socks that were shaped like cat ears.

A brown shoulder bag hung from her shoulder. She was kind of small-chested, but the way that strap cut into her cleavage made her chest look way bigger than it probably was.

The otaku dream!

She came closer, accompanied by the faint but pleasant aroma of soap.

“Thank you sooo much for meeting me again! I really, really mean it!” she said with a sweet smile.

“I-I, uh, er... th-thank you!” was the best reply I could muster.

If she asked me out on a date, that means that she likes me, right? I didn't want to get my hopes up too much, but I couldn't help it.

We started by strolling through the otaku shops of Electric Town, making our first stop at Animate.

“So, so!” she started excitedly. “I wanted to come here with you first to learn more about your tastes! I wanna know aaall about what anime and characters you like!”

“O-Oh, i-is that so?!” I replied, failing to hide my enthusiasm at my Mashiro being interested in *me*.

We walked up the stairs to the floor selling anime figures, where she began tugging at my arm.

“Look, look! Ichigaya! It’s Fumiko Sagisawa from *IMS*!”

Being touched all of a sudden left me dumbstruck and red in the face, and she was now so close that her smell was practically inebriating.

“O-Oh, that’s true! But how do you know that I like Fumiko?!”

“You’re always tweeting about her! So I thought, maybe, you liked her. Right?” she replied.

“G-Gojo, y-you... actually read my tweets?!” I asked, overjoyed.

“Hm, you’re older than me, right? You don’t need to be all polite! You can call me Mashiro!”

“R-Really? Thanks! Anyway, you said you like *IMS* too, don’t you?”

“I do! The bestest character is Tachibana, but I love Fumiko too!” she grinned.

“You know, most *IMS* fans are guys, but you’re really into it anyway, huh?”

“I just like cute girls! And female voice actors, they’re cute too!”

A cute girl who likes cute girls... So they really do exist...

“What about girly games? They’re cute, I guess. Are you into those too?” I asked her.

“Hmmm, not really!”

Why?! Why are you so perfect?! I-It’s not like I hate girls’ games or anything, but...

“But all my friends are girls and they only like that kind of stuff, so I have no one to talk to... That’s why I’m so sooo happy I met you!” she explained.

“O-Oh, I see!” I replied, finally understanding why the beautiful Mashiro had asked *me* out. The more I learned about her, the lovelier she became—if it were even possible to become any more perfect.

As we continued down the Animate aisles, talking about anime and games, it

became clearer and clearer how similar our tastes were. But there was more...

“Y-You even play this kind of thing?!” I asked, surprised, after seeing her ogling a tapestry from a well-known eroge.

“Yep... My older brother has a huge collection, so I borrow them sometimes...” she said, looking down at the floor and fidgeting with embarrassment.

“O-Oh, that makes sense.”

The thought of such a pure, innocent, sweet girl playing raunchy games had me way too worked up.

“I like anything that has lots and lots of cute girls!”

I wonder if she realizes she's my ide— an otaku's ideal girlfriend...



“Where should we head to next?” I asked Mashiro as we left Animate.

“I don’t know if you’d wanna see,” she mumbled as she tugged at the hem of my hoodie and blinked up at me shyly, “but the café I work at is over there... I’ll show you if you really, reeeally wanna see?”

“Y-Yes! Of course!” I replied, trying not to let the cuteness overload give me a heart attack. Somehow, every single thing she did and said was adorable.

Her sleeves seemed so long on her tiny frame that they almost covered her hands. *She even has moe sleeves?! That’s got to make her the number one otaku dream girl.*

She led me to the front of a famous maid café. I’d known by looking at her Twitter account that she had a part-time job, but I didn’t know that she was a waitress *here* of all places.

I bet she looks so cute in a maid outfit... I need to see!

We both chose something to eat from the menu—savory for me, sweet for her—and gave our orders to the waitress/maid.

“I need to go to the girl’s room!” Mashiro politely said as she stood up from her chair.

“Go right ahead!”

Taking the opportunity to get my head out of the clouds, I took a deep breath and thought back over the date so far.

I haven’t screwed up anything, right?

There was no way to be completely sure, but what I could be sure about was Mashiro’s utter perfection. She just had to breathe and I liked her even more. Let’s be honest for a second, I already loved her. I wanted her to become my girlfriend—possibly even my wife... but that made the thought of screwing something up even scarier.

I wonder what she thinks about me. I don’t think I’ve made a bad impression, at least. Maybe I should set up our next date right before we say goodbye. Or confess my love to her... Yeah, no, I’m not doing that.

I checked my phone and noticed that I had a new message. It was from Kokoro.

“Your date going good?”

Sh-She’s worrying about me?! Even though she’s in the middle of a date herself?! She should stop worrying about me and be careful that nothing happens to her! That guy, that Bambi... he wouldn’t try anything funny on her on the first date, would he...?

I was having so much fun with Mashiro that I’d totally forgotten about everything else. But that message had slapped me back to reality, and I started worrying about Kokoro again.

Overcome with my worry, I googled “Bambi cosplayer” to see if I could dig up any dirt about him.

The first results were links to his Twitter and some of his other weird cosplay social media accounts, but as I scrolled further down...

List of Cosplayers Who Are Only in It to Pick up Girls

What?! I thought, but Mashiro was back before I had a chance to click the link.

“Sorry to keep you waiting!” she said as she sat back at the table.

I really need to read this...

“Oh, sorry, I’ve got to go to the toilet too!” I said, springing from my chair and leaving her waiting for me. My bladder may not have been full of urine, but my heart was full of concern.

I sat down on the toilet and opened the link. It was a thread on a popular forum.

I scrolled nervously for a few seconds before I finally found Bambi’s name.

That Bambi guy is the worst. He’s always there at events cosplaying some popular character, and he’s only on Twitter to talk to girls. He’s so obvious.

So he’s known for chatting up girls, huh?

Look out for Bambi. He invited me out to talk about cosplaying and kept insisting I go to his house. I managed to refuse because I'm older than him, but I'm scared of what would happen to a younger or more easily influenced girl.

>>632 He did the exact same thing with me. I'm so glad I refused. He'd probably have forced his way into my pants otherwise.

I-If this is true, then he's going to do the same thing to Nishina! Why didn't I convince her not to go?! I should have just told her!

I had to warn her.

"Bambi is DANGEROUS. Run away ASAP!"

I waited, but the message wasn't marked as read.

I even tried calling her. She didn't pick up.

"Are you all right?" Mashiro asked when I returned from my unnaturally long toilet break.

She's so considerate, I thought briefly, but I couldn't stay calm enough to enjoy the moment.

"Er, yeah, sorry I took so long..."

"Are you okay? Are you sick?"

"No, I'm fine."

Mashiro was my dream girl. I was having so much fun with her that I wanted to stay with her as long as I could. I also wanted to set up our next date before leaving her, and then ask her on date after date until I could finally ask her to be my girlfriend.

But I couldn't shake off the image of Kokoro's soft smile as we parted ways that morning. Despite having spent the last few days mad at each other, she still went out of her way to wish me luck. Without her help, I'd never have even

managed to get Mashiro to look at me.

It was all thanks to Kokoro. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't have gone to that otaku meetup. Even if I had, I wouldn't have been presentable and fashionable, and I'd never have had the confidence to start a conversation with anyone.

If I left right now, my fairy tale with Mashiro would probably be over. But still...

"I-I'm really sorry, but I have to go! Something urgent came up!" I said.

I couldn't see her expression as I was lowering my head in apology, and Mashiro didn't reply.

I glanced up nervously. She was staring at me, expressionless, until our eyes met. Then her smile flickered back like I'd switched it on.

"O-Oh, really?!" she squeaked.

Was it just me or was she angry for a second there?

"I... I had the funnest of fun times today so time just flew by... I maybe would have liked to be with you a little longer...but, if it's something urgent, I can't keep you... right?" she asked, melting my insides with puppy eyes and a sad smile.

Is she saying I shouldn't go?! Did she really just say that she had fun and wants to stay with me longer?!

This was probably the only time in my life that I'd ever hear these words coming from the mouth of such a cute girl. That made this the luckiest day of my life. If I stayed with her, maybe I'd even stand a chance with her. If I left, I'd flush all those dreams away.

But would I be happy? Would I be happy knowing that I'm enjoying myself while Nishina is in danger...?

I wouldn't. We promised that we'd help each other out, to have each others' backs! And we've already been through so much together!

"I'm sorry. It's really important!" I said as I left some money on the table, enough to pay for my order and part of Mashiro's.

“I see... Okay. Please be careful,” she said, a kind smile on her lips.

“Sorry! Thanks!” I told her, and I ran out of the maid café, leaving my dream girl behind me.

“What the hell is your *problem*?! *Jeez*!”

* * *

Mashiro had smiled at me as I left, but I knew she must have lost all interest in me. That was the last I’d probably ever see of her.

I tried calling Kokoro again while I ran toward the station, but she still didn’t pick up. I took the subway to Shinjuku, since that’s where she’d told me she’d meet him. I texted her again to ask where she was.

Finally, I got a reply.

“Hm... I don’t like where this is going...”

What?! What is going where?! Has something already happened?! As soon as I left the train, I tried calling her again.

“Hello?” she answered after three rings.

“Nishina! Where are you?!”

“Uh? What? I’m at Mister Donut. Bambi’s in the toilet right now.”

“Which Mister Donut?!”

“Oh, sorry, he’s back. See ya,” she said, hanging up the phone.

As fast as I could, I looked up the closest Mister Donut and found that it was right next to the station’s east exit, on Yasukuni Street. I didn’t know if she’d be at that specific store, and, even if she was, I had no idea how I was going to save her. But I had no choice—I had to go. I opened up the maps app and sprinted toward the Mister Donut.

I reached the store and checked inside, but I couldn’t see Kokoro or Bambi.

“Damn... was I too late?!”

I tried calling Kokoro again, and she didn’t pick up, making me even more

scared.

I have to find her! I've wasted my shot with Mashiro to save her!

I ran down Yasukuni Street, my eyes darting wildly around for a glimpse of Kokoro. She couldn't have gone too far if she was only here a second a—Finally! I found her.

She was waiting for the light to change at a pedestrian crossing. Bambi was right next to her, and the two were talking.

“Nishina!” I yelled as I ran in her direction.

“Huh? I-Ichigaya?!” she stared at me, surprised. “What are you doing here? Weren't you supposed to be on a date?”

“Oh, you're that fellow from the meetup,” Bambi commented.

“W-Wow,” I said, panting and wheezing. “What a coincidence! I just happened to be walking around here...”

I hadn't thought to come up with an excuse to explain why I was there, so lying was my best option.

“What?” Kokoro said. “You aske—”

“So! Where are the two of you headed?” I quickly interrupted her.

“Back to my place. There's a few details about cosplaying together that we need to go over,” Bambi said.

Just as I thought! He's trying to take her home with him!

I looked at Kokoro, who still just appeared shocked to see me.

“S-Sorry, Bambi! I, like, totally forgot I was supposed to meet him today!” she then said, apologizing to her date and walking toward me.

So she really was in trouble!

“Hm? Really? But I wanted to invite you to my next group cosplay. There'll be lots of well-known cosplayers, you know? Can't you ditch your friend and come with me anyway?”

Would you look at this sleazy jerk! If I don't do something right now, he's

never going to let her get away...

“A-At the meetup, I heard the way you were talking about girls in the restroom so, actually... I came here because I can’t trust you around Nishina!” I told him in a single breath, so scared that my voice rose an octave higher than usual.

Kokoro visibly held her breath.

“You eavesdropped on me?” Bambi said, raising his perfectly groomed eyebrows. “That’s not very nice of you. What are you so worried about, anyway...? Oh, I get it! You’re into her, aren’t you?”

“Th-That’s not it! She and I are... We’re helping each other reach our objectives! We’re like... comrades!” I quickly rebutted.



“Comrades? Huh?” Bambi looked at me, confused.

“I’m sorry, Bambi! I’ll have to call it a day!” Kokoro said, bowing to him.

I grabbed her arm and quickly pulled her away.

“What about your date?” Kokoro asked me as we headed back to the station. We’d slowed down now that Bambi was out of sight.

“I said that I had to leave because something urgent came up.”

“What?! *You* left your dream girl hanging like that?!”

“Forget about what I did! More importantly, what was going on there? What was that *‘I don’t like where this is going’* that you sent me?”

“I... I’m sorry. I totally should have listened to you when you told me to stay away from Bambi,” she told me, sadly. “After we’d talked about cosplay, he invited me back to his place. I said no, but he kept pushing me. He said he wouldn’t do anything to me and he just wanted to show me some cosplay magazines. He really wouldn’t listen no matter how much I said no, so I didn’t know what to do and ended up sending you that text...”

“R-Really?!”

The warnings I found online were true...

“And you told me it’d be dangerous so many times. I’m really, totally sorry.”

I could have said “I told you so,” but I didn’t. If anything, I still felt bad for not giving her the whole picture about Bambi.

“And you even came all the way here for me... I never thought you’d see that text and leave your date just to help me... Sorry!” she said, bowed her head to me over and over.

“Actually, I didn’t come here because of your text.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before. During the offline meetup, I heard that asshole Bambi talking to his friend in the toilet. I already knew you shouldn’t trust him...”

“You did say something weird about listening to him in the restroom earlier...”

“Yeah, that’s the one. But you looked so happy about meeting him that I couldn’t get myself to tell you the truth. Also, I didn’t overhear anything that proved he was dangerous back then, just that he was an entitled jerk who looks down on girls.”

“I see... So that’s why you tried to stop me meeting him...”

“And earlier, when I looked his name up, I found a thread of girls that had been on dates with that douchebag, where it said he always tried to persuade them to follow him home. That’s why I was so anxious to come here.”

“A thread?”

“Yeah. Look, this one,” I said, showing her my phone. We were already on the train, sitting side by side.

Kokoro completely absorbed herself in reading the posts.

“This right here!” she finally said, waving my phone at me. “This about being invited home to talk about cosplays! It’s exactly what he did to me!”

“Sounds like it.”

“Ugh! And to think that you’d even warned me! Why am I so bad at judging men?”

“There’s no way you could have known,” I said. “We’re both new to this dating thing. You’ve got to mess up a few times to learn how to judge men, right?”

“I... I guess you’re right,” she said, finally smiling.

“I wonder if anyone ever actually fell for all that though,” she said. “That was a super pushy way to pick up a girl. Like, not smooth at all.”

“I wonder, yeah,” I said. We began scrolling through the rest of the thread out of curiosity.

I’m a cosplayer, and I was invited home by B*mbi. He pressured me so much that I ended up going.

“Oh!” Kokoro and I gasped in unison, our curiosity growing by the second.

I liked him back then, so even if he did make a move on me I wouldn't have minded. But this guy, I swear... He forced me to be a spectator for his one-man cosplay show. He asked me over and over and OVER which costume looked better on him. He had me take pictures, review his poses, blah blah blah. He was so into his own cosplays that I may as well not have been there. I couldn't take any more of that self-absorbed narcissist and so I left. He kept texting me day after day but I ignored him after that.

“Pfft,” I choked, stifling a laugh.

“What?! No way! This can't be true!”

Since we were on the train, Kokoro tried to keep her voice down, but she was bent over with laughter.

“He puts all that effort into picking up girls so that he can just... *pose*?! That's the saddest thing I've ever heard!” I said, unable to contain my own laughter anymore. “And you were head over heels for that narcissist! You *really* suck at judging men, don't you?!”

“Oh, shut up!” she said, laughing as well.

Relief washed over me, sinking into my heart. Not only was Kokoro safe, but we were laughing together again.

Shortly before reaching our station, I checked my phone again and noticed a notification. It was a message from Mashiro. I opened it nervously, wondering what she could have written.

“Thank you so much for today ≡ ≡ It was the funnest of fun being with you! If it's okay with you, I'd like to see you again sometime, when we can maybe stay together a bit longer...”

I couldn't believe my eyes. Far from being fed up with me, she... liked me even more?

What's going on here?! Does this mean I still have a chance?! I have to apologize to my Mashiro and make sure I never do anything so cruel to her ever, ever again!

“Finally home!” Kokoro said, sitting on the couch. “You know, I’m happy that I can, like, finally relax when I get home. The air in here has been sooo tense these past few days!”

So she felt the same way...

“And honestly, I’m also super relieved we made up. If we didn’t have that fight, maybe I would have actually listened to that stuff about Bambi.”

“I-I’m relieved too!” I said. It didn’t take long without Kokoro around for me to realize how much I relied on her.

“So, all forgotten?” she asked.

“All forgotten! I’ll keep teaching you how to become the ideal otaku girlfriend and find that ‘super hot’ otaku guy you want! And I’m counting on your help too!”

“For sure! I won’t hold back! Now things are back to normal, you’ve gotta show me even more cute girl characters and stuff! I need to come up with my next cosplay!”

“Sure!”

“A-And then...” she said, suddenly blushing, “I’ll cook anything you want tonight. Like, anything. What do you want to eat?”

“Hm? What’s this about?”

“You know... You really helped me out today. I felt super grateful and super relieved, and... I wanted to do something to thank you...”

Nishina... She can be harsh sometimes, but deep down she’s really a kind, genuine girl.

I’d lost my most powerful of allies, but thankfully I’d found her again. I felt that, when she was with me, I could push myself harder—I could do things that

I could never do on my own.

I'm sure that if she stays by my side, one day I'll find the perfect otaku girlfriend, I thought to myself.

So... let's both give it our best.

Afterword

Hello everyone, Rin Murakami here!

It's been quite a while since my last work. If you read it and have been waiting ever since... I'm sorry. If this is the first of my books you've ever read, it's nice to meet you! Thanks for picking up a Rin Murakami book for the first time. I hope you all enjoyed reading *Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend: Roomies and Romance*!

In the time since my last book, apart from writing, I've been doing the usual stuff: traveling the country to follow idol groups, spending hundreds of hours on gacha games, becoming a regular at maid cafés, and so on.

This book is mostly based on my own experiences with otaku romance and those of the people around me. I asked otaku couples that I know personally, as well as some of my friends who were looking to get married. Thank you to everyone that shared their experiences with me! Maybe some of my readers who are looking for romance themselves will find some of the stuff in this series useful. Maybe...

Part of this volume included the experience of meeting people through an MMORPG. Actually, that was inspired by something similar that happened to me. A friend and I were playing a certain game together, and we both ended up falling in love with the same player. We were rivals in love for a while, always doing our best to impress her and possibly win her over. One day though, that friend of mine did a bit of snooping around, finding one of her social media accounts—one of *his* social media accounts, actually. The “girl” in our love triangle was a middle-aged man.

I hope that writing so much about romance will motivate myself to do a little better in that department in the future.

As for all the otaku trends, I have some friends who advise me about the stuff I'm not so familiar with, but I always end up becoming even more obsessed with the trends than they are...

Lastly, there are some people I'd like to thank.

First of all, Fumiaki Maruto, who left some wonderful comments about this book. Thank you for your kind words!

Then, Kurehito Misaki, the illustrator for *How to Raise a Boring Girlfriend*. Thank you for letting my characters talk about Kato Megumi!

And of course Mako Tatekawa, who drew the illustrations for this volume. Thank you for all the cute girls! I'd date even the most hardcore fujoshi if she looked like that!

I also want to thank the editor in charge of this volume, since it all started with one of their ideas. Thank you so very much for your valuable guidance.

Last, but not least, I want to thank all of you for buying and reading my book! If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be able to publish anything.

I'll do my best to write ever more entertaining stories in the future, so look forward to those. Thank you and see you next time!

Rin Murakami



WE BECAME
ROOMIES WITH
ONE GOAL IN MIND:
FINDING THE
PERFECT
OTAKU DATE.

GUIDE
TO THE
PERFECT
OTAKU
GIRLFRIEND
ROOMIES
AND
ROMANCE

Kokoro Nishina

A popular, extroverted gyaru and secret otaku. Kokoro even cosplays (but only at home)! Her ideal boyfriend is tall, slender, and enjoys—or at least doesn't dislike—content aimed at otaku girls... possibly even the odd naked guy or two.



"TEACH ME
HOW TO
BECOME
THE KIND
OF GIRL
THAT OTAKU
LOOK FOR!"

"WHO ARE
YOU TO
SPEAK FOR
ALL OTAKU
GIRLS
ANYWAY?!"



Kagetora Ichigaya

Your everyday high school student. Though his family moved overseas, Kagetora stayed in Japan to be close to what he loves the most: everything otaku culture has to offer. His perfect girlfriend is a cute, innocent girl with long black hair, who likes everything that he likes.

"WHAT'S UP?
YOU FALL
IN LOVE
WITH MY
COSPLAY OR
SOMETHING?"



Elena Minami-Williams

Kagetora's younger half-English schoolmate. Elena is a bona fide otaku who's passionate about yuri, and she secretly works as a voice actress. She voices VTuber "Emily Saionji."



Takeshi Aisaki

Kagetora's classmate and friend who everyone calls just "Ai." Ai may look cute, but don't be fooled—he actually has a harsh personality. Kagetora is the only one who knows about his hobby: crossdressing cosplay. That might be down to everyone online mistaking him for a girl...

"I WAS
ABLE TO
HIDE MY
IDENTITY
FOR SO LONG
ONLINE THAT
I'D NEVER
HAVE
THOUGHT
I'D
GET FOUND
OUT AT
SCHOOL..."



"HI HI! I HAD
SO MUCH FUN
TALKING WITH
YOU YESTERDAY
UWU I'D REALLY
LIKE TO SEE YOU
AGAIN, IF YOU
DON'T MIND! ♡"

Mashiro Gojo

Who is this dream girl? Kagetora met her at an event. Mashiro loves anime and games loaded with cute girls. Kagetora even manages to score a date with her, but...



COSPLAYING AT HOME

"MAKE SURE
I LOOK CUTE!
I'LL CHECK THE
PICTURES AT
THE END!"

"WEREN'T YOU
SUPPOSED TO
KNOW NOTHING
ABOUT ANIME
THAT GUYS
LIKE?"



"WH-WHAT IS IT?!
SAY SOMETHING!
DON'T JUST STARE
AT ME SILENTLY
LIKE THAT! DOES IT
LOOK THAT BAD?!"

"BAD?! ARE YOU
OUT OF YOUR MIND?!
IT'S SO CUTE THAT ANY...
AHEM, I-I THINK
THAT THIS MAKES YOU
LOOK BETTER THAN
ANYTHING YOU'VE WORN
IN FRONT OF ME SO FAR!"

"SERIOUSLY...?
J-JUST KNOW THAT
IF THIS DOESN'T
WORK, I'LL KILL YOU."

A VIRGIN-KILLER OUTFIT



House-sharing Rules:

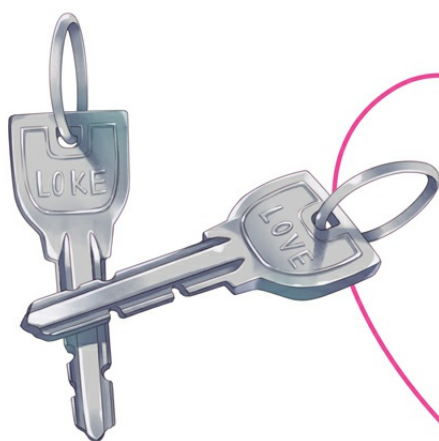
Rule 1 ... Teach your roomie about the latest otaku trends to help them find a date.

Rule 2 ... Show your roomie how to dress and behave to appeal to their ideal date.

Rule 3 ... Help your roomie search for places to meet potential dates.

Rule 4 ... Support your roomie in getting to know these potential dates.

Rule 5 ... Give advice to your roomie on how to message and go on the perfect date.



Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend



Bonus Translator's Afterword & Glossary

Any story that stars two otaku as protagonists is bound to use a lot of culturally unique terminology. Most of these words will be somewhat familiar to the Japanese reader, but even the most up-to-date English-speaking otaku cannot be expected to understand the nuances of all of them, despite many terms being heard regularly. Whenever possible, the editor and I ensured Kagetora and Kokoro speak in such a way that the story is easy to follow and the meanings of these words are clear, but the fast-pace of dialogue doesn't always allow for explanations. I will use this section to expand on some of the nuances of the terminology and setting.

Otaku

Originally, otaku referred to any person knowledgeable about their hobby to the point of obsession—be it trains, geography, stamps, or whatever else. The word has slowly changed to become a way of addressing people whose hobbies specifically are anime, manga, games, and other similar forms of entertainment. Note that, while otaku will happily use it to describe themselves, it remains a derogatory term, similar to calling someone a nerd. In the novel's title, as well as in most dialogue, the term can be recognized by its most recent definition. In some cases, however, calling oneself a "voice actor otaku" would show how fixated one is with that particular subset of otaku culture.

Blood Type

In Japan, blood type is akin to astrological signs, seen as an indicator of one's personality and behavior. Common knowledge is that A-types are serious and diligent, B-types are carefree and self-centered, AB-types have characteristics from both of the previous two, and O-types are able to get along well with everyone. Note that, as these beliefs are easier to rationalize from a scientific standpoint than astrology is, even adults—to an extent—buy into them. A well-

known example is workplace discrimination against B-types.

Boys' Love (BL)

A subgenre of love stories depicting the romance between two young men. These range from wholesome to somewhat explicit. For the *very* explicit, see “**Yaoi**” below. Within BL stories, the passive, usually feminine character is called the “**uke**,” while the aggressive and more masculine one is called the “**seme**.”

Doujin

Strictly speaking, doujin are pieces of media created and sold independently, as opposed to being published by a company. “*Doujinshi*” specifically refers to printed material, especially manga, often—but not always—erotic. There are doujin games, doujin CDs, and so on. Since independent creators are very limited in the amount of copies they can sell, they can use established characters from other works without attracting too much attention from the copyright owners, who rarely notice and almost never care.

The doujinshi owned by Kagekora are of the most common variety: erotic manga starring characters from other works. These are usually sold directly by the author at conventions such as Comiket.

Eroge

Short for “erotic game,” eroge are video games that feature sex scenes as one of their main selling points. The quintessential format for an eroge is usually that of a dating sim or visual novel—text heavy games where gameplay is limited to reading text and choosing between dialogue options. Some eroge use the plot as merely a justification for the sex scenes (these are usually called **nukige**), while others also have intricate character interactions and carefully crafted stories overshadowing the importance of the pornographic content.

Fujoshi

A girl who loves BL and yaoi. Specifically, the stereotype dictates that fujoshi

use their vivid imagination to conjure up romantic stories between male characters who, in their original media, are not necessarily in love with each other. While yaoi-lovers use this word to refer to themselves, calling someone a fujoshi usually implies a certain amount of contempt, as if to frown upon the practice of imagining fictional gay romances. Although seldom used, there is a word to indicate male lovers of yaoi: **fudanshi**.

Gacha Game

These video games, usually played on phones, take their name from Gachapon: vending machines that dispense a random capsule containing a toy. Players “roll” the gacha, as one would with a die, for a chance of obtaining an in-game item they want: a character, an item, a powerup, *etc.* Some games require microtransactions, the payment of small sums of money, in order to roll the gacha. A single roll may cost anything from around one to ten dollars, but, as Kagetora knows, this can add up quickly.

Most of these games, incidentally, are targeted at otaku, with the gacha prizes being beautiful girls, handsome boys, or both—the goal of the game is to collect these characters to make them fight monsters, sing concerts, run races, or whatever else.

Gyaru

Originating from the English word “gal,” this refers to girls, usually teenagers, who follow a specific set of fashion trends and behaviors. They wear flashy, revealing clothes; they dye their hair (usually blonde); and they sport lots of colorful makeup and a salon tan. The stereotypical gyaru is very extroverted and not particularly interested in school, devoting most of her time to partying and shopping. While Kagetora sees Kokoro as a gyaru, she is admittedly a very tame one: her otaku hobbies and unfamiliarity with romance are very un-gyaru-like characteristics.

Idol

Idols can be singers, voice actors, TV personalities, dancers, and more. When

one of them—sufficiently attractive and talented—becomes famous enough, they start to gain a following of passionate fans. The fans will buy their merchandise, follow news regarding them, go to see them at live events, and more. Idols usually have some sort of artistic endeavor as their main occupation, but this is secondary in importance to the number and passion of their fans.

Moe

This word can either be an adjective, a noun, or a verb. In Japanese, “to moe” means “to feel wholesome love or strong affection toward something or someone.” Something that is moe, similarly, is lovable, endearing, and cutesy. In the story, Kagetora mentions Mashiro’s “moe sleeves.” Other examples are a high-pitched voice, a love letter written with shaky hands, or a person as a whole, as long as they embody these cute characteristics. Nowadays the term is also used to describe anime or manga whose main selling point is their high moe content, and their fans self-deprecatingly call themselves “moe-buta” (literally “moe pigs”).

Otome Games

“Otome” meaning “young lady,” this is a genre of games mainly aimed at women. They usually involve a female protagonist romancing one or more handsome characters as she progresses through the plot. Because of their often homoerotic subtexts, they tend to be one of the main interests of fujoshi—Kokoro being no exception.

Power Level

In Japan, otaku as hardcore as Kagetora are not looked upon kindly. Most try to play down the extent of their passion, and some, like Kokoro, just hide it altogether to avoid being shunned. Of course, someone who only reads a few manga and occasionally watches anime would have a much easier time hiding this fact than someone whose room is full of doujinshi and anime figurines—an otaku with a higher power level, as it were.

Shojo

Literally meaning “young girl,” shojo is a genre of media (including manga, anime, games, etc.) mainly aimed at girls from elementary to high school. There is no set definition for what a shojo work can or cannot be; anything that would appeal to its target demographic will do.

Tsundere/Yandere

The “-dere” suffix comes from “dere-dere,” a word which loosely translates to “being affectionate.” Depending on the prefix, the -dere archetypes show this affection in different ways.

The “tsun” in tsundere comes from “tsun-tsun,” which could be rendered in English as “being cold.” A tsundere character therefore acts coldly, but only to hide the affection that they truly feel. The typical example is cooking something for their crush, but then saying, “It’s not like I cooked it for you or anything! I was hungry myself!”

The “yan” in yandere comes from “yanderu,” “being ill.” A yandere character shows their love and affection in obsessive, morbose ways. They usually pester their loved one with questions: “Where were you last night?”, “Who were you with?”, “Was it another girl?”, “Were you cheating on me?”

Visual Kei

This is a music classification that describes not the sound, but the look of musicians. Typical elements include flamboyant spiky hair, colorful makeup and accessories, and painfully tight leather outfits. The “kei” simply means “type” or “style,” and the word is usually shortened to V-Kei. Some popular real-life examples are Dir-en-grey and Glay.

Yen

As the story is set in modern-day Japan, I thought that while leaving all references of money in yen could be confusing, changing them would be

unrealistic and distracting. Care has been taken to make it easy to gauge whether a certain number is supposed to be “a lot of money” or “a very small amount of money,” mostly from the characters’ reactions. However, for the curious, there is an easy way to obtain a dollar value which is in the ballpark: simply divide by 100. 1 yen roughly equates to 1 cent; 100 yen to 1 dollar; 10,000 yen to 100 dollars; and so on.

As high schoolers who live in an unspecified area of Tokyo, Kokoro and Kagetora would make slightly more than 1,000 yen (around 10 dollars) an hour with an average part-time job.

Yaoi

Yaoi indicates homosexual romance between two men and any erotic antics that may ensue. The lesbian counterpart to this genre is called “**yuri**,” which encompasses all works depicting everything from the platonic affection between two young girls to the raunchiest sapphic sex.

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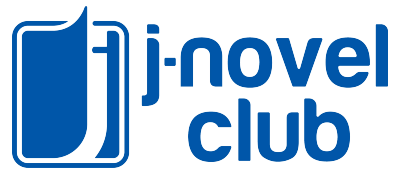
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Guide to the Perfect Otaku Girlfriend: Roomies and Romance Volume 1

by Rin Murakami

Translated by Marco Godano Edited by Stephanie Buck

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